

Birds and Atoms



mirawonderfulstar

Chapter 1

*A perfect containment invites trespass,
the wish to shave below the skin
and write in seed ink, mine.*

-Alice Fulton, "Echo Location"

Severus cracked an eye open just enough to look at the clock that sat on the bedside table he shared with Rosier. Barely 7 a.m. He squeezed his eyes shut again and snuggled more deeply into his blankets. Transfiguration didn't start until 8:30 but that wasn't why Severus was so reluctant to leave his bed (or, not the entire reason).

His left arm felt curiously heavy, although Severus knew it was only his imagination. The subtle magic, woven into his skin since birth and activated as he turned sixteen, had no more weight than darkness, no more mass than light. No, it was only Severus's dread that weighed his limb down.

Severus had known about the *fortis animi* spell since he was a child of seven, when he had asked his mother why her forearm was so heavily scarred as she showed him how to scrub and peel potatoes. She'd sighed and tucked her lank hair back behind her ear, and then set down her knife and taken him to the attic where she'd started to dig through the wooden crates of books. Instead of emerging with a spellbook or a book of potions and handing it to Severus to take to his room, as she'd done in the past when he'd asked questions, she pulled out a thick and heavy book so old that Severus was afraid to touch it lest it crumble into dust. She'd settled, cross-legged on the floor in the small beam of sunlight from the attic's tiny window, pulled Severus into the crook of her arm, and shown him *The Marke Of Magicke*.

It was not a spellbook at all, but a very old history covering dates back to the seventeenth century. It told of how wizards had faced increased persecution following advances in the muggle world, how wizards had begun to fear the extinction of their kind. Until a wizard named Selwyn had created a spell to reveal powerful magical connections between individuals, passed down through the bloodlines of families and meant to draw those with extraordinary magical power together for the purpose of propagating magical blood. The spell had been handed down with the old wizarding family names ever since.

Severus's mother had told him that when he was sixteen years old, the name of a witch or wizard with whom his magic would be most powerfully combined would appear on his arm. Severus had been quick to notice her choice of words and said in a huff that it hardly made sense for two witches or two wizards' magic to draw them together if the purpose of the spell was to create wizarding children. His mother had smiled tiredly and run a hand over his hair, and said that perhaps Selwyn had just been an old romantic who wanted those with the most compatible magic to be together independent of the use that *The Marke Of Magicke* had stated for the spell, and told Severus that, to the dismay of pureblood supremacists everywhere, sometimes the names that would appear would be muggleborns, half-bloods, squibs, or even muggles. Severus narrowed his eyes at the latter two, trying to wrap his mind around how the most compatible magic for somebody could be a lack of magic, before he glanced down at his mother's scarred arm.

"Did my father's name used to be there?"

His mother had sighed again and stood up. "No more questions, Severus. We should get back to

those potatoes before it gets late."

Severus sighed himself, banishing the memory and trying to send with it the sick feeling in his stomach he always got these days when he thought about his mother. The same kind of sick feeling that would soon engulf him concerning his arm if he didn't get up and start preparing for the day soon. He would look at it after he was dressed and ready for class. He needed to be more awake to deal with it. Reluctantly, Severus lowered his feet to the cold stone floor.

At one time he might have found the idea of the mark romantic- he certainly had entertained ideas to that effect for weeks after his mother had told him about it. He'd never gotten a straight answer from her about what her's had said and had assumed, with all the naivete of a child raised on fairy tales, that her mark had indeed been his father's name and that her decision to pursue him had led to her fall from grace in the Prince family, with the scarring a result of some attempt by them to dissuade her.

But, as Severus had grown, so had his father's animosity towards magic and therefore, towards his mother. Severus was now inclined to think that Eileen Prince had made a grave error in choosing to follow the mark against the wishes of her family, and rather suspected that the abuse she now suffered at Tobias's hands must have been going on even before he'd learned about marks, and that she'd cut the name off herself.

It was not only this that made Severus wary of knowing who he was marked for. He'd seen a number of unfortunate events take place because of the spell in the past year, as his classmates reached the age of sixteen. Even before this crucial year it had caused trouble; he could remember Lucius Malfoy, a handsome sixth year, striding into the common room during only his second month at Hogwarts and asking if anybody had seen Bellatrix Black. They had left the common room together and there had been much gossip about whether he could have been marked with her name; only much later did news reach Severus that they had gone for a walk in the grounds, duelled, and that Lucius had been marked for Bellatrix's ten year old sister Narcissa. Bellatrix clearly had not been pleased.

Severus would almost have been relieved if the name on his arm had been a strangers'; he would have to endure neither seeing them nor the bullying that was sure to come up regardless of whom it was. It was too much to hope that he could hide who he had been marked with for any extended period of time, and once somebody knew, even if it was not somebody that his housemates turned their noses up at, word would inevitably make it's way back to Potter and his gang. And anyway, some of his fellow Slytherins knew every pureblood family in Europe and would surely antagonise him if his mark did not come from that pool. He could not envision a scenario in which he would not be ridiculed by somebody over this, and did not relish having yet another aspect of his life he must carefully conceal from the world. At least robes covered up his arms, he thought, grabbing a set from his wardrobe and heading for the showers.

Severus determinedly did not look at his arm as he scrubbed, nor as he dressed, nor as he brushed his teeth and charmed his hair dry. It was only when he was seated back in his room and had waved to Rosier to head to breakfast without him that he rolled up his sleeve. He felt quite sick and was extremely glad he was sitting down. He took a deep breath, willing his stomach to settle. It didn't really matter, anyway. He was hardly the kind of person who needed to be planning for a future that involved love or children so it was irrelevant. His future, as far as he could see, had only potions and spell invention and hopefully, someday soon, introduction to Lucius's organization. *Fortis animi* didn't apply to him, not really. With this slightly reassuring thought, Severus looked down.

And felt his stomach flip in revulsion and horror.

There, on his inner left forearm, was the name *James Potter*.

Mulciber waved him over when he entered the great hall for breakfast, brandishing a scroll of parchment that Severus recognized as the other boy's Transfiguration homework from the night before, and Severus mentally groaned. He wasn't really in the mood to go over work that he'd half written himself the night before, but perhaps focusing on school would take his mind off the mark. It didn't matter, Severus repeated to himself as he slid in beside his classmate and took a slice of toast and an egg from the platters before them. He forced himself to eat and willed down the churning of his stomach to focus on Mulciber's questions.

By the time Severus and Mulciber were leaving the great hall, the words on Severus's arm had been pushed to the back of his mind in favor of thoughts about the metaphysics of vanishing spells and the predicted weather for the weekend. It might have been a cold, dreary Friday in January but tomorrow was nonetheless a Hogsmeade weekend and Severus was weighing the inconvenience of walking to the village in the snow against the possibility that Dogweed And Deathcap might have finally restocked their supply of fresh soporiferous beans. If so, he fully intended to spend what little money he had at the moment on them so he could resume his experiments with the textbook's Draught of Living Death- he had been making it steadily more potent for the last month or so and had one or two new variations he wanted to try. He was mentally going through the list of ingredients to ensure there was nothing else he'd need to buy when Lily slid up beside him. She glared pointedly at Mulciber, who cast Severus a nasty look but strode on ahead.

"Why are you hanging around with him?" Lily asked, her tone one of deep disgust.

"We're classmates. He wanted to pick my brain before we hand in the Transfiguration homework." Severus said, raising his eyebrows. Lily must know most of the people who spoke to him only did so for homework help.

She huffed but didn't press further. "Anyway, I just wanted to wish you a happy birthday."

"Keep your voice down!" Severus hissed at her. She looked very annoyed. Severus *felt* very annoyed. He should not have to cast nonverbal *muffliato* just because his best friend wanted to talk to him.

"Why?"

"I do not wish anybody to know it is my birthday." He whispered to her. She smirked very slightly and rolled her eyes.

"I've got a present for you, if you want to meet me in Hogsmeade tomorrow. I'd give it to you here but, well... your friends have made it fairly clear how they feel about muggles and muggle items."

Snape's stomach gave another unpleasant flip. Anything Lily wanted to give him that she'd seen as muggle enough to plan to pass it along outside of school would definitely be conspicuously muggle enough that he'd have to hide it from his fellow Slytherins. He hoped it was something small.

"Certainly I will meet you. I need to go to the apothecary, we can meet up on the high street around noon?"

"Great, I'll see you then. If the weather's too bad I'll be waiting in the Three Broomsticks." She smiled at him as they entered McGonagall's classroom, and for a moment Severus felt like things

might have started to go back to normal between them, but then she walked away to sit with Mary McDonald and Severus took the empty seat next to Avery.

Severus made it through the day without anybody confronting him about today's date, so that was something- either nobody had overheard his conversation with Lily or word had not gotten around. Just as well that it was a Friday- people were much too preoccupied with end-of-week plans to give him much thought.

Saturday was a windy sort of day, and Severus found himself pulling on an extra pair of gloves and wrapping a scarf firmly around his face before setting off for Hogsmeade. Blast it. There was little chance of Lily waiting for him on the street in this weather, and unless he met her beforehand and could convince her to go to Dogweed And Deathcap with him, he'd most likely be talked into holding their conversation in the Three Broomsticks. He stuck his head into the great hall before he left, hoping to catch her before she set off so they could go together, but she was not there.

The apothecary did in fact finally have a fresh supply of soporiferous beans, and Severus handed over two galleons readily if not happily. He stared down into the little paper bag full of what looked to the untrained eye like small figs before stowing it in an inside pocket of his coat and setting off for the high street to look for Lily. It was early enough yet that he might catch her before she went into the Three Broomsticks and lead her off to a quieter, less crowded bookstore instead.

All hopes of this instantly fled when he saw her coming out of Zonko's joke shop with Sirius Black. He made to duck inside Honeyduke's but Lily and Sirius were headed towards him and it was only once he was inside that he spotted Lupin and Pettigrew standing over a display of caramels. As Severus took a deep breath and began to prepare himself to fight, James Potter emerged from behind the case of unusual sweets and grinned. There was a nasty look in his eyes that made Severus sneer back at him.

"Hi, Snivellus. Fancy seeing you here." Potter took a step towards him, his grin growing wider as he glanced towards Lupin and Pettigrew. "I wouldn't have thought you'd want to waste your time on something so nice and normal as sweets. Don't you have something disgusting to be doing right now?"

"I am talking to you, am I not?" Severus shot back, his hand clenching around his wand in his pocket. He could sense Lupin and Pettigrew moving towards him from the right and was on the point of turning when the bell on the shop door tinkled, letting in a cold wind and Lily and Black's voices. Severus watched Potter's gaze flicker to somewhere over his head. Lily's voice stopped abruptly, and then Black laughed. Severus whirled around, pulling out his wand, and nearly knocked over a tall tower of truffles as he tried to maneuver himself into a position where he didn't have his back to any of the four Gryffindor boys.

Before anybody could make another move, however, the matronly shop owner descended from the stairs behind the till and fixed the scene before her with a stern glare.

"I don't want any brawling in here, do you hear me?" She looked sharply from Severus, with his

wand out, to Potter, who had assumed a dueling stance beside the Cockroach Clusters, to Black and Lily, who had moved forward into the room as one unit. The other people in Honeyduke's had gone silent. Before anyone could say or do anything else, Lily had strode forward, grabbed Severus's hand, and begun to drag him away.

"Not here, Severus, don't be so stupid." she chastised in a grumble. Severus let himself be led out the door. "I'll see you later, huh, Sirius?" she called back over her shoulder, and Black and Potter both beamed at her.

"What was all that about?" Lily demanded fifteen minutes later, once they had settled into a booth as far back in the Three Broomsticks as Severus could find.

"I suggest you ask you close dear friend Sirius." Severus sneered. "What was *that* about? Surely Potter cannot like his trained dog going after the object of his affections?"

Lily snorted. "You're so obnoxious sometimes, I don't know why I bother." She took a sip of her butterbeer. "If you must know, Sirius and I are kind of... friends. He's interested in the muggle world- honestly I think he's just trying to impress Marlene McKinnon, you know, she's muggleborn- and when he saw me with... well..." Lily lifted what looked like a small case onto the table. "I know it's kind of a frivolous gift." she said, pushing it towards him. "But I noticed how much you enjoyed the record player when you were round at my place last summer."

Severus lifted the case open and saw that it was a portable turntable. There were three records in sleeves inside, set against the lid of the case in a pocket. He pulled them out and ran his hand over the covers. Something seemed to stick in his throat.

"I got you that Pink Floyd song you liked. And our favorite Rolling Stones one. That third one was actually a recommendation from Sirius, he loves Queen. We might be going to a concert together over the Easter break, me and Sirius and Marlene." Lily grinned at him and Severus forced himself not to flinch at this last statement. It really was a frivolous gift, one he'd have to hide from his house mates and then again from his father when he returned home for the summer. And it looked expensive; Severus could have bought hundreds of soporific beans with the money this must have cost. But it had also been sentimental and extravagant and so *Lily*, and Severus felt an ache in his chest that had nothing whatsoever to do with his birthday present.

"Thank you very much." he said, smiling softly across at her. Her tentative grin broke into a full on beam, and Severus felt his own smile spreading wider in response.

"You're quite welcome. I'm sorry about any trouble dragging you to Hogsmeade might have caused but, well, it's sixteen. It's an important birthday." She pushed his own untouched butterbeer towards him.

Severus's arm felt heavy again. "Yes," he said. "I suppose it is." He took a drink and grimaced.

"What's that look for?" Lily asked. "You like butterbeer."

Severus scanned their surroundings. Nobody seemed to be watching them but he cast another *muffliato* all the same. "Have you heard of the *fortis animi* spell?"

Lily shook her head, frowning.

"The spell is passed down through wizarding families and as you are muggleborn you would never have had any exposure to it, although I confess I would have guessed you had heard about it before now from precious pureblood Potter or one of his..."

Severus stopped speaking as the full force of that thought hit him. How could he have failed to recall that Potter was also from a wizarding family, and as such would most certainly have knowledge of the spell already? When was Potter's birthday? Would Potter wake on that morning with Severus's name on his arm because if so, all Severus's attempts to hide his mark would become futile. It was too much to hope that he was one of the people who was imperfectly matched, and that Potter would be marked for somebody else. The Gryffindor gang's attitude towards him would increase tenfold if Potter were to be marked for Severus and that was not a chance he was willing to take.

Lily clapped her hands in front of his face and Severus came back to attention with a start. "What?" he snapped.

"I said, what was that about Potter?" Lily said coldly

Snape stood up. "I must go to the library."

*I can testify
the tic of prayer persists in nonbelievers.
Under my distressed surface, under duct tape,
the Hail Mary has a will of its own.*

Lily groaned and banged her forehead dramatically against the table, earning her a sharp look from Madam Pince as she glided past. "Come on, Sev, this is useless. We've been looking through history books about *fortis animi* on and off for three weeks."

"This is important to me." Severus ground out from between clenched teeth. "I must do this. I have hardly been dragging you along."

"I don't see why. So somebody's name is on your arm. So what? So your name might appear on theirs. Why does that matter? Like you said, it doesn't have to mean anything at all, just another relic of old pureblood nonsense."

Severus sighed. He envied her ability to say it didn't matter with such conviction. Most people who had grown up knowing about the spell would have expectations attached to it, both political and personal ones, and if he was being honest with himself there was a part of him that was disappointed purely because this had seemed one last small bit of romance about the wizarding world that had been snatched from him. But how was he to explain all that to Lily? It was pointless.

"It matters," Severus said with forced calm, running a hand through his hair, "because the name on my arm is James Potter's."

Lily blinked. "Let me see."

"Absolutely not. We are in public."

"And it's nearly curfew on a Friday. Not exactly a busy time for the library."

She had a point and Severus told her so, but he still shook his head. "In the bathroom."

They made their way to the nearby girl's bathroom, Lily's whole body taught with impatience. Only after they had locked the door and Severus had cajoled Lily into helping him put up a large number of privacy spells, did Severus roll up his sleeve and show Lily his forearm.

She stared at it for a long time. When she finally spoke, her tone was one of trying to hold in a smile.

"Does this mean that you're soulmates, then?"

Severus rolled his sleeve back down and glared. "Just because the spell has the word soul in it does not mean it necessitates all the ridiculous romantic trappings we associate with the word." Or at least, it shouldn't have to. "I hate James Potter and James Potter hates me. This spell merely means that we would be magically compatible."

"You and all those books keep using that phrase but have you thought about what that actually means?" Lily countered. "Magic is a pretty deep and complex part of a witch or wizard."

"Thank you, I had no idea." Severus sneered. Lily ignored him and plowed on.

"Conventional wisdom is that witches and wizards have something within us that muggles don't, some innate ability that allows us to manipulate the external world where they can't. If some witches and wizards are marked for muggles and squibs, then either the power which this spell seeks out can't possibly be searching for that magic-making quality, or that magic-making quality isn't what we thought it was."

"And you're trying to say that this is proof that there is a soul, and that *fortis animi* really does join two people based on the compatibility of their souls."

"Yes." Lily said simply.

Severus crossed his arms. "And what of the possibility that conventional wisdom about magic is wrong?"

Lily shrugged and began dismantling the privacy spells so they could leave the bathroom.
"Honestly I like the first option better."

In early March Lily bumped into Severus after Arithmancy to tell him that she'd learned that Potter's birthday was the 27th of that month. Severus felt a twinge of panic. They were no closer to discovering any kind of spell that could reverse the *fortis animi*, and Severus knew why: there wasn't one. The longer they'd researched Severus had been forced to admit that Selwyn must have been a genius, to have worked out how magic functioned and how it was tied to a person. And the man had been such a Slytherin, to use that knowledge to make a spell without ever sharing it and running the risk of his work becoming undone. Severus knew it might take a lifetime to retrace the bastard's steps and create his own countercurse (for the *fortis animi* most certainly was a curse as far as Severus was concerned), but he threw himself into an attempt nonetheless. Anything was

better than being marked for James Potter.

James flopped into one of the squashy armchairs by the fire with a dramatic sigh. "I'm beat."

Sirius snorted as he took the seat next to him. "C'mon, that quidditch practice wasn't that bad."

"It was. We're going to get absolutely creamed next week."

"Against Ravenclaw? Doubt it. Their best chaser's been sick on and off all spring and they're too stubborn to replace him." Sirius flung his long legs up over one arm of the chair and scooted into a more comfortable position. "Enough about that, though. What do you want to do for your birthday tomorrow?"

James shrugged, yawning and stretching his feet out towards the fire. "I dunno. I'd like to go into Hogsmeade and get some more firewhisky, the stocks in my room are nearly out." He got out of the chair, levitated it closer to the fire, and resumed his spot.

"Prongs, Prongs. You're getting boring in your old age. We'll get plenty of alcohol for the party tomorrow afternoon, I was more asking what you wanted to do afterwards. Fancy a poke 'round the dungeons? That's the only section we haven't got done on the map yet."

A soft huff of breath came from the corner. Sirius craned his neck to look at the source, which turned out to be Remus, sitting at the desk by the window with a stack of books and his homework spread out in front of him.

Sirius frowned at him. "What's up with you, Moony?"

Remus glanced up towards the fire where the two boys sat. "Nothing particularly." He looked back down at his parchment and slowly dipped his quill into his ink. "I just think," he said in a measured voice, "that unless you're planning on doing your homework tonight, and it doesn't much look like you are, that maybe we should map out the dungeons another night. You'll be too tired and hungover to get anything done on Sunday if we spend all day drinking and then all night out and about."

"Are you suggesting we spend the night of James's sixteenth *studying*?" Sirius sounded scandalized.

"No, of course not. I just think we should stay in just this once. We'll have some firewhisky, shoot off some fireworks from the top of the astronomy tower, play some... Exploding Snap, or something. And you know," he added hastily, as Sirius and James sniggered to each other, "Evans might be a bit more persuadable on your birthday and after a good party."

James considered this. "That's probably true," he admitted. "Fine, I guess the plan is party in the common room tomorrow, then another crack at Evans, then Sunday rest and recuperation and group study sesh for Defense Against The Dark Arts, that's the quiz that's coming up, right?" Remus nodded.

"Great. I s'pose we'd better go and get some booze, then!" Sirius said, rubbing his hands together.

"Wormtail offered to go along on that. He's supposed to meet you by the one-eyed witch at curfew tonight." Remus said absently, having returned to his homework.

"Why can't he just meet us back here?" Sirius rolled his eyes. "What's Wormtail got going on that's so important he can't be in the common room after dinner?"

"I don't know, I'm just passing the message along." Remus sounded slightly weary. "You'd better get going soon, it's nearly nine."

James stood up, grumbling, and went to get his cloak from under his mattress. Sirius turned and studied Remus more closely.

"You okay, Moons? You seem tense. You coming down with something?"

Remus sighed. "It's just stress." He looked up and grinned slightly at Sirius. "You all seem to forget between quidditch and the map and everything else that for some of us, it's OWL year."

"Nah, we haven't forgotten, we just know we've got you to keep us on the straight and narrow so we don't bother with it ourselves." Sirius grinned back and Remus shook his head, chuckling.

As James came back down the stairs with the cloak, Sirius sprang up and held out a hand for it. "I'll go. I wanna interrogate the little rat, see what he's been doing when he's not been with us. It seems like it's happening an awful lot lately."

"Maybe he finally started seeing that Slytherin he's been eyeballing in Herbology all year." James suggested, handing over the cloak.

Sirius laughed. "Don't be gross, Prongs. Who'd want to date a Slytherin?"

James waved him off as he stepped through the portrait hole and sunk back into his chair. He held up his arm and traced his fingers lightly over his forearm. "Just think, Remus." he murmured. "This time tomorrow I'll have a soulmate."

"Hmm." Remus said. James glanced up at him.

"You don't think it's romantic at all?" Of all the marauders, James would have guessed that Remus would have been the one he could count on to be soppy about the *fortis animi* spell.

"I think you have very specific ideas of what you want and don't cope well with getting something different." Remus said, looking up from his work and fixing James with a very serious look.

"What's that supposed to mean?" James said

"You're expecting it to be Lily, aren't you?"

James stared. He supposed he was pretty transparent when it came to Evans, but this wasn't really something he'd thought about extensively. It would be nice if his mark was Lily, but he didn't *expect* it, did he?

"Don't be stupid, I know that's not how it works. It's determined based on your magical skill or whatever, it could be anybody."

Remus sighed. "You say that, but I think deep down you've never really thought it would be *anybody*, you've always thought it would be her."

James rolled his eyes, starting to get irritated. "Could you get to your point?"

"My point is that I think you need to prepare for the possibility that it'll be someone other than the girl you've had a crush on for the last four years."

James got up and stalked towards Remus. "Is there something you're not telling me, Moony?" He leaned his crossed arms on the desk and flashed his cheekiest grin at his friend. "Wasn't your birthday just a couple weeks ago? Are we, perhaps, matched up and it slipped your mind to tell me?" He winked.

Remus narrowed his eyes and rolled up his sleeve. The name on his arm was *Sirius Black*.

James recoiled. "Doesn't Sirius have-"

"Marlene McKinnon? Yes." Remus's voice was completely flat. He rolled his sleeve back down, not looking at James. "Like I said, things don't always work out the way you expect. It's something you need to be prepared for."

For a moment he looked extremely vulnerable and James felt an uncomfortable mixture of pity and embarrassment for Remus. Torn between the desire to pull his friend up and into a hug and to walk away, James settled for patting his hand where it lay on the desk. Remus gave him another tired smile.

"Anyway, you might as well help me with some homework since it'll probably be at least an hour until Padfoot and Wormtail get back." James smiled in what he hoped was an uplifting way and grabbed his bag from where it lay next to the fire.

Remus chuckled. "Sure."

He made room at the table for James and James pulled a chair over to join him, then pulled out his Defense textbook and quill to get started. They worked in silence for a bit, punctured by the occasional sound of a page turning or a parchment rustling.

"Oh, and Prongs?" Remus said after a bit.

"Hmm?"

"The spell doesn't have to be romantic. Soulmates shouldn't be determined by some crusty old spell." He gazed at James intently, and James patted his hand again.

As soon as James woke up the next morning, Sirius was there holding a strip of black cloth and grinning hugely.

"Hope you slept well! Hold out your arm and don't look at it."

James frowned slightly as he rubbed his eyes. "Why not?"

"Because I want to tie this around it so we can have a big reveal at the party." Sirius said, taking a seat on the edge of James's bed. "C'mon, James! Don't be shy! Here, I won't look either." He closed his eyes.

James laughed and held out his pajama-clad arm. With a swish of his wand Sirius rolled up the sleeve and tied the fabric (silk, James realized now he could feel it) around his arm.

"Great! I'm headed down for breakfast soon with Moony, are you joining us?" Sirius said as he stood up.

"Yeah, just wanna shower first." James said. "Oi, Wormtail!" he shouted. Peter gave a yelp and

shot out of the bed across the room. Sirius sniggered.

"You coming to breakfast?" James asked. Peter yawned and nodded, and clapped his hands together. "Good, see you both later."

"Don't you even think about taking that silk off, Prongs!" Sirius called after him as he descended the staircase.

*The spirit uses me. It holds me up
to the light like a slide.
It claims a little give, a quiver,
can prevent a quake.*

Truthfully, the next time James thought about the mark underneath the fabric at all was late in the evening, after several butterbeers and perhaps one firewhisky too many, as he sat in an oversized armchair with a pretty sixth year friend of Sirius's who's name he couldn't remember chattering away in his ear. He was starting to get tired of her, really, (not least because he wasn't sure who she was) and was in the process of extricating himself when he stumbled and fell against Remus, who had been making a hasty retreat upstairs.

"Sorry, Moony." James said, straightening Remus's robes where he had pulled them.

"It's alright." Remus said. He glanced back into the room and then up the stairs.

"Trying to escape?" James said. He knew that, had it been Remus's choice, there would not be a party going on at all and they would have celebrated James's birthday in a quiet, more Marauders-oriented fashion, but that Remus put up with the festivities because he knew they were what Sirius and James wanted. James felt a sudden surge of affection for his friend.

"Quite." Remus said softly. James followed his gaze to where Sirius and Marlene McKinnon were kissing passionately by the window.

"Fancy going up the astronomy tower to set off the fireworks?"

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea." He darted upstairs and returned a few moments later with a large crate of Filibuster's.

As they made their way towards the portrait hole, James was on the point of tapping Kinsgley on the arm to ask him to send Sirius to the astronomy tower if he came asking after them, before Remus pointed out in quick mutter that Sirius still had the map and would be perfectly capable of finding them if he wanted. James nodded and they slid under the cloak as they entered the hallway. It was just after curfew and while James was sure nobody would reprimand *him* too harshly (it was his birthday, after all), McGonagall wouldn't be too happy if her prefect Remus Lupin was caught wandering around at night.

Half an hour later they were seated on the astronomy tower parapet, swinging their legs into the nothingness for hundreds of feet below and passing some muggle booze Remus was fond of back and forth. It wasn't half bad, actually, James thought as he took another sip, although not strong enough for his taste. The fireworks crate sat further back on the tower; Remus had decided it was

more polite to wait for Sirius and Peter, but James privately thought that he'd be surprised to see either of them- Sirius had looked pretty close to getting laid when they'd left and Peter, well... Peter had been growing distant for weeks. Probably that Slytherin girl.

"I know that nobody really knows how the spell works and it isn't supposed to be a romantic matchmaking tool," Remus murmured, handing the bottle back to James, "but I really did think it was possible that he'd... you know. Because *I've* always loved *him*." James patted his hand again. When Remus laid his head on his shoulder he started, and Remus snorted and sat up straighter.

"C'mon then, let's see who you've got." He lifted James hand from where it lay atop his own and made to untie the silk.

James pulled his hand away and took another swig from the bottle. It wasn't as nice in large quantities, in fact was kind of cloying. "What is this, again?" he asked, making a face. Remus took the bottle back with a sigh.

"Creme de menthe. But take off the fabric and look at who you have."

James thought for a moment that this wasn't how he'd pictured this night happening at all, and hadn't he expected a lot more Lily? He was supposed to have unwrapped his arm at the height of the party to find her name, and then she'd kiss him to wish him happy birthday, and then he'd have to explain what the *fortis animi* mark meant because she was muggleborn and wouldn't know, and then they'd go somewhere private and she'd kiss him some more and let him feel her boobs and maybe more than that...

But that wasn't what was happening. With a little sigh of disappointment, James started working on the knot Sirius had tied that morning. There was still a chance he'd find Lily's name, whatever else might have happened. After a minute of struggling with the knot James gave up and pulled out his wand to sever the fabric. It fell away, and he set it on fire and watched it fall away down the tower, before lifting his forearm up to look at it in the faint sliver of moonlight.

He blinked at the name there.

"Remus." he said. "Please look at my arm and tell me I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing." he said, his voice deliberately measured.

Remus leaned in, lighting his wand to see better.

"Severus Snape." Remus whispered, his tone slightly awed. James whipped his head around to look at him.

"You sound like you expected this to happen." James said. He could feel anger starting to churn his stomach.

"I..." Remus said in a hushed voice.

"Remus?!" James said, knowing he sounded slightly hysterical in the silent darkness but not really caring. Snivellus Snape. There couldn't have been a worse person to be marked with.

"I saw them in the library together last week. Snape and Evans. And I... well, truth be told, I went over to rile him up a little bit, but then I saw that they'd got about twenty books on the *fortis animi* spell pulled out, and I asked what they were doing."

Remus climbed backwards off the parapet and leaned against it, looking down at the grounds. "Lily knows I've got Sirius, she saw it by accident one day while we were working on Charms

together. And I suppose she saw something we had in common because it sort of slipped out that Snape has you, and then they had an argument which I can't remember any of, there was suddenly an odd buzzing sound, and she took me a couple tables away and explained that they've been researching the spell since January, trying to figure out how to reverse it."

Remus shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, James, she asked me not to tell you on the off chance that you were like me and got matched up with somebody else. She didn't want to embarrass him."

"Embarrass *him*!?" James shrieked, climbing down off the parapet himself so he could shake Remus by the robes. "How about me? What am I gonna do when Sirius asks who I got? When anybody else who was at that party? How am I supposed to deal with being magically compatible with Severus fucking Snape?"

"Snape?" Sirius's voice boomed from the entrance to the tower. James and Remus turned to watch as Sirius and Peter hurried towards them, Sirius taking full advantage of his long legs and Peter practically jogging behind. Sirius grabbed James's hand and pulled his arm towards him. He stared at it for a good ten seconds, then threw back his head and let out a bark of laughter.

"Just goes to show, doesn't it? The whole thing's a joke." Sirius shook James's hand dramatically and then dropped it and clutched at his sides as he continued to laugh. "Magically compatible soulmates. My mother did so love to harp on about how important it was for maintaining bloodlines but of the four of us, two have got blokes and one has got a muggleborn. Just wait, Peter'll get a squib in April and then we'll have all three kinds of people purebloods like to pretend this spell doesn't affect." Peter turned very red at this and babbled his protest. Sirius ignored him. "What a laugh." He wiped tears out of his eyes. "Now we really do need to finish the dungeon section on the map, Prongs. You'll need a way to go visit your boyfriend."

The rage simmering in James's stomach was heating to a full, rolling boil now. He gripped his wand tightly and was just about to open his mouth to challenge Sirius's statement when Remus stepped forward beside him.

"Stop it." he said, and James was slightly impressed to see that he'd stepped very close, stretching himself up to his full height and standing level with Sirius. He pushed him, hard, in the chest, and Sirius took several hasty steps back to avoid falling. "Nobody can help who they're marked with and I'm sure not everybody can be as delighted by the results of the *fortis animi* as you clearly are with yours."

"What are you implying?" Sirius snarled, narrowing his eyes.

"Just that you seem to have forgotten yourself the last several months. Not going around with any of the usual girls, are you Padfoot? You've been with Marlene a whole four months now, that's a record for you. When will we hear the happy announcement, surely you can't have gone this long without knocking her up?"

Sirius hit him. Peter yelled, Remus's head snapped back with a crunch and for a split second James was sure he was about to turn into the wolf although the moon was a waning crescent in the sky. Instead, he whipped out his wand so fast that he nearly stumbled, and it seemed Sirius must surely hit him again in that moment of imbalance but Sirius was busy drawing his wand, too, and then there were spells flying. Peter was dodging out of the way and James was rushing forward to pull them apart but there was no need. One of Sirius's spells hit the crate of fireworks and it exploded, covering the tower in sparks and streaks and stars and threatening to hit all four of them. James grabbed both Sirius and Remus by the arms and ran for the stairs, Peter tripping down ahead of him. By the time they'd collapsed in a heap at the bottom of the tower, they were laughing and breathless.

"Sorry, Moons." Sirius said quietly, a rare bit of tenderness in his voice.

"I'm sorry as well." Remus responded, and Sirius rolled his eyes and pulled him to his feet before giving a hand to James and Peter.

"It doesn't really matter, after all. It's just an old tradition." Sirius said bracingly as he wrapped an arm around James and Remus's shoulders. Remus nodded and they set off down the corridor back to Gryffindor tower, but James couldn't help thinking, as he slung an arm around Peter's shoulder on the other side, that it mattered very, very much, whether any of them wanted to admit it or not.

Chapter 2

James felt marginally better about the whole Snape thing the next morning, but only because he had other things to worry about: namely, Sirius's raging hangover and Remus's coldness towards the both of them. They studied for Defence in near silence, punctuated only by Sirius's occasional grumbling and Peter's muttered questions. James was left more or less to his own thoughts.

Merlin, he was dreading running into Snape the next day. He had no idea what he'd say to the git. "Sorry for all the years we hated each other, but it looks like we've been matched up this whole time"? It would not go over well. James couldn't think of anything that would.

Severus and Mulciber were headed to Defence Against The Dark Arts, talking in an undertone about the spells that would be on the quiz and what kinds of spells they would be effective against. Severus had just agreed with Mulciber that the defence they were learning this year would be alright against most hexes and jinxes but useless against any serious curse when he heard his name.

"Oi, Snape!"

Severus turned, his wand at the ready, to see James Potter heading up the corridor towards them, flanked by Black and Pettigrew. Lupin was conspicuously absent.

"Alright, Snivellus?" Black said loudly enough to make Severus wince. "How's your arm?"

Severus felt his stomach flip unpleasantly. He'd known this was coming but some part of him had hoped Potter would see this for what it was, a private war between the two of them, and not involve Black who would be sure to make it a spectacle for the whole school to see.

"Why would there be anything wrong with his arm?" Mulciber snarled, drawing his own wand. People were beginning to stop walking and watch, Severus noted with displeasure. He began flicking through a mental list of spells, trying to decide between a simple *langlock* to shut Black up and something more permanently incapacitating.

"Do his friends not even know when is birthday is?" Black said with a crow towards Potter. "Imagine, not having anybody who likes you enough to bother to know your birthday." Pettigrew guffawed, and Severus shot a stinging hex at him which Black deflected.

"Tsk, can't do any better than that between the two of you? I thought you were supposed to be some dark magic expert, Mulciber."

"Whereas the three of you can't think of anything more interesting to throw at us than insults." Severus said, breathing fast and shaking slightly. "I'm not really surprised. Where's Lupin? He was always the brains among you." Black's face darkened, and Severus pounced. "Lost him, have you? Trouble in paradise? How sad. Friends should stick together, after all. *Epoximise!*"

Pettigrew and Black, who had been standing quite close after the deflection spell, were suddenly glued together awkwardly, with Pettigrew's right arm trapped between their torsos. He yelped and Potter leapt forward, sending a shower of sparks towards Severus that he deflected easily.

Mulciber pulled out his own wand, but before he could open his mouth, Potter shot a spell at him with a shout of "*Cantis!*"

Mulciber began to sing, very loudly and very out of key.

"I see your friend won't be joining the opera any time. What a racket." Potter sounded gleeful as he watched Mulciber's eyes widen and his hands try uselessly to cover his mouth. Severus privately had to agree and was on the point of muttering the counterspell when Black sent another spell towards him. He blocked it and it bounced off the walls and down the corridor. Several of the onlookers screamed and leapt out of the way. Black laughed.

"Having fun?" Severus hissed, finally managing to cast the counterspell on Mulciber. Black shrugged.

"Putting you in your place is always fun, Snivellus, isn't that right James?" Potter slapped him on the back and nodded.

"You're so full of hot air." Potter shot at them. "In fact... *aestus ventus*." He held his wand steady as a hot blast of wind blew over Severus and Mulciber, knocking Mulciber, still recovering from the singing spell, onto his arse. He bumped Severus's arm as he went down, causing his diffindo aimed for Potter's schoolbag to tear a bit off his robes as well. Potter flinched back and Black, who by this time had unstuck himself and Pettigrew, surged forward.

"What in the name of Merlin is going on here?" came Professor McGonagall's shrill voice. Severus felt his heart drop. The adrenaline that had been coursing through him as he fought Potter was now making him feel sick and shaky as McGonagall came striding in between them.

"Potter and Snape! Not this again!" She glanced from Snape and Mulciber, who was just now clambering to his feet with an ugly look on his face, to Potter, Black, and Pettigrew, the latter of which was rubbing his very bruised arm and looking at his feet. Potter took this opportunity to examine the damage Severus had done to his robes and, judging by his wince, the skin underneath.

"I am disgusted by this. Now, I want an answer and I want the truth: which of you sent the *Furnunculus* jinx down the hall and into my classroom of first year Hufflepuffs?"

All eyes turned towards Black. He fixed a serious expression on his face. "That would have been me. I am sorry, if I'd have expected to miss I would have sent something a little less... disfiguring."

"You ought not to be sending spells down the corridors at all, Mr Black! Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention for you. I expect to see you in my office after dinner this evening."

"Black groaned and McGonagall's eyes flashed at him. "Get along to your class, before I make it a week of detentions. My Hufflepuffs were terrified." She shooed Potter and his gang away and rounded on Severus and Mulciber. "As for you two," she said coldly, "I don't doubt that they deserved whatever you gave them but I simply cannot allow students to duel in the corridors. Fifty points from Slytherin each, and if I catch you at it with them again, Mr Snape, I will be informing the headmaster. This is the third and final straw of the year for you."

She strode away and Severus clenched his fists so hard he could feel his nails cutting the palms of his hands.

"Can you believe that? Only taking points off of Black? We should have cursed them." Mulciber muttered to Severus as they headed towards their Defence class. Severus nodded his head jerkily, his mind on the rumor mill that was sure to spread the shouted jab about Snape's birthday. It wasn't

a difficult leap from that comment to the *fortis animi* spell, and soon people would be asking around in Gryffindor, and his secret would be out. Less than two days after Potter's birthday. Well, Severus was surprised it had taken that long, actually. It was probably the luck that March 27th was a Saturday.

Mulciber didn't ask, amazingly enough, and yet somehow this made Severus feel worse instead of better. Black's words echoed in his head. *Imagine not having anybody who likes you enough to bother to know your birthday.* Severus had the sudden urge to snort at his own foolishness. So Slytherins liked and respected privacy, that didn't mean they didn't care about each other. Mulciber had helped him fight, hadn't he? And besides, the only friend he really needed was Lily. Everyone else was just acquaintances.

Lily was excited. She hadn't gone camping in years, not since she was a little girl, and never without her parents along. Easter break was going to be great, her and Mary and Marlene and Sirius. Sirius had never been camping before, and that coupled with his excitement about seeing Queen had filled him with an infectious happiness that seemed dampened only by Remus's cold farewell as they'd left the Gryffindor common room to head into Hogsmeade and catch the train.

"What do you think that was about?" Mary whispered to Lily as they hurried out onto the grounds.

"I've got a theory but I'm not sure." Lily replied, glancing at Sirius and Marlene, who were walking slightly ahead of them, holding hands and speaking in low voices, their heads very close.

The concert was fantastic, made even more so by the large quantities of muggle booze they'd drunk both before and during. Marlene had refused to let Sirius bring his own alcohol, claiming it might be suspicious and violate the statute of secrecy, but Lily doubted that any of the other concertgoers would have noticed had somebody apparated in or out of their midst; everyone else was equally sloshed. In any case, they did resort to using magic to set up their tents when it became apparent that Mary and Marlene were too drunk to fit the poles together in the darkening evening.

Lily put up the tent and was on the point of starting a fire when Mary pulled her inside to see the tent. They'd borrowed it from Mary's parents, and as soon as Lily went inside this fact became evident. Not only was it magically enhanced so that it resembled a small flat, it was decorated in exactly the sort of light, floral style Mary's as home. It was a comfortable mix of her parents, magical enhancement and muggle charm. Lily beamed around at the bunkbeds and the living room and (praise the Lord) a small bathroom with a shower.

"Isn't it great?" Mary said, beaming at Lily. "When I was younger my family had a muggle tent, but when I went off to school and my parents started to travel more dad got a wizarding one."

Lily nodded her agreement. "I think we should still do our cooking outside on a fire." she said.

"Oh, definitely. Hold on, I've got some of those... metal stick things... somewhere in the kitchen." Lily giggled and helped Mary find her campfire sticks.

A short while later, the four were seated around a campfire, waiting for it to burn to a suitable point to roast hot dogs and passing around various types of booze. Marlene suggested they tell ghost stories which seemed to amuse Sirius- Lily was on the point of asking whether wizards even had ghost stories before the pair of them started snogging and she chose instead to throw a marshmallow at them.

"Oi!" Marlene said, and Sirius looked down at the marshmallow on the ground with a mock-sad expression.

"If you'd have given me warning I could have caught that." he pouted. Mary shrugged, grabbed another one from the bag and shouted "here it comes!" before throwing it. Sirius, to Lily's absolute astonishment considering the number of drinks he'd had, caught it in his mouth with a grin.

"Cat-like reflexes you've got there." Marlene joked.

"Nah, dog-like." Sirius said. He stretched his arms above his head. "This is great and we should do it again in the summer. Two days is too short for this."

Lily, Marlene, and Mary exchanged looks. "What do you mean, two days?" Mary said after a moment. "We're staying here through Thursday."

Sirius looked taken aback. "I have to get back to the castle for Tuesday night." he said. "I thought we'd talked about this and were leaving tomorrow."

Marlene rolled her eyes. "Your friend can get along without you for one week. Come on, Sirius."

Lily suddenly had an alternative theory about the look Remus had given Sirius as they'd left. A moment later, Sirius confirmed it.

"But Remus- I need to be back by Tuesday."

Lily rolled her eyes. "For god's sake, Sirius, I don't think he needs you around right now. Some time apart might be good for you both. Give him time to forget about the mark."

Sirius tensed, pulling away from Marlene and sitting up straighter. "What?"

"The mark." Lily reiterated. Sirius stared. "The *fortis animi* mark?"

"What about it? I know he got some boy and that it's been causing him trouble, but he won't tell me who it is, so I can't go hex them for him, and barring that, being there when he wants me is all I can really-"

Lily let out a high pitched laugh. She covered her mouth with her hand, knowing that she should stop, because if Remus had gone to all the trouble of hiding it from Sirius she certainly didn't have the right to reveal it. Maybe it was the alcohol in her bloodstream, or maybe it was the whole mess with Severus and Potter, but whatever it was she heard herself say "It's not just some boy, you moron. The name on Remus's arm is yours."

Everyone seemed frozen in the aftermath of this announcement. Marlene was staring at her boyfriend, leaning away from him, her eyes wide. Mary had let out a small gasp from beside Lily. "So that's why he didn't want to come when I invited him."

Sirius's gaze snapped from Lily to her. "No, that's bloody not why." He stood up and began glancing around, gathering up his wand and his jacket. "I need to go."

"How are you going to get back to Hogwarts in the dark?" Marlene called after him as he headed into the tent to collect his belongings.

"I'll... fly." He said distractedly.

"You didn't bring your broom."

"Yeah, okay, I'll walk back to the main road and catch a bus into London. Get on the train from there."

"That'll take all night! Just stay here with us, Sirius, you can owl him in the morning when my owl brings the morning paper. This isn't a good time for people to be wandering about on their own, you've heard the stuff that's been going on!" She stood up and strode towards him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"I can take care of myself." He said, shrugging her hand off. "You three look after each other. See you back at school at the end of break."

He put on his rucksack and sprinted off into the night. The moon was nearly full and they watched him run through the tall grass for a long while before he disappeared behind a hill.

Marlene looked at Lily, her eyes narrowing. "What," she said slowly, "the bloody hell was that all about?"

Sirius changed into his dog form as soon as he was out of eyesight of the girls, carrying the rucksack in his mouth and sprinting on his four legs through the night. It would take him the rest of the night to get to Hogwarts like this, but that was still less time than waiting around for a bus into London and then boarding the train. Besides, Sirius didn't think he could have sat still long enough. He needed to *run*.

It started to rain in the early morning. Sirius got back to the castle just after sunrise, exhausted, soaked, but desperate to find Remus, because this information about the mark explained everything, everything.

He sneaked into the castle through the mirror passageway and crept up to Gryffindor tower. He had told McGonagall he wouldn't be back until later that day and while he didn't think she'd mind his early return, he didn't want to take any chances of meeting her, or the small number of students who had stayed for Easter break, until absolutely necessary. It'd only slow him down to have to talk to somebody and explain his presence. No, right now he needed to get back to Remus.

James and Peter had gone home for Easter- Peter because he always did and James to get away from the castle and Snape, who stayed for every break, the slimy, studious git. Remus and Sirius alone of the marauders would go through the upcoming full moon together, and if Remus had heard from one of the girls that Sirius would be out camping until Thursday, then of course he'd have been rude to him as they'd left. He'd already been showing the signs of the approaching transformation and it was set to happen on Wednesday night. Coupled with the newfound revelation that the increased distance between them had been deliberate on Remus's part because of that damn soulmate spell, and Sirius had a lot of misunderstandings he had to set right today.

He muttered the password to the Fat Lady and headed inside, climbing upstairs to deposit his bag and look for his friend.

Remus was there as Sirius had hoped, curled up in bed under several layers of blankets. Sirius set his bag on his own bed and sat awkwardly down beside him, placing a tentative hand on his back.

"Moons?" he murmured, hoping he didn't startle the boy.

Remus groaned and rolled over, blinking up at Sirius. For a second his expression was pure,

unfiltered shock, and then he scowled and sat up, pushing Sirius off his bed.

"What are you doing here and why on earth would you wake me up at- " he cast a quick tempus charm, "six forty three in the morning?"

Sirius picked himself up off the floor and looked down at Remus "I..." He ran a hand through his hair and glanced around. Merlin, this was harder now in person than he'd thought it would be. "We need to talk."

Remus looked at him with something, Sirius saw with a pang, like suspicion. Sirius tried to look apologetic rather than hurt. It must have worked, because Remus sighed and nodded.

"Alright. I need breakfast and you could use a shower." he said, taking in Sirius's damp hair and mud-spattered muggle clothes. "Go get cleaned up and we'll go down to the great hall."

Remus got out of bed and immediately stumbled. Sirius caught him, his arm around his waist, and set him back in bed. He peered more closely at the bags under his eyes, his pallor, and shook his head.

"I think you should stay in bed and I'll bring you something. Toast and eggs?"

Remus shook his head. "I'm fine. Or, at the very least, I'm well enough to go down and eat. Just give me a minute." He waved Sirius towards the showers and Sirius went reluctantly.

They did not, in fact, talk over breakfast. There were few enough students there for the Easter break, and Snape was making enough of a show of lurking, that Sirius was very reluctant to say anything that might be overheard. Normally he'd have suggested they go for a walk around the grounds to get out of earshot of any possible eavesdroppers, but the rain from the early morning had continued, and the damp chill that clung to the corridors would no doubt be worse outside. Additionally, Remus seemed to have tired himself out just walking down to the great hall, and Sirius was rather anxious to get him back to the warmth and comfort of the common room before he started in on anything that might upset him.

*The Norman name for quiver-grass
was langue de femme. As in gossip, as in meadows,
one ripple leads to the next, as in cascade
experiments: one touch and the worlds take place.*

Severus watched Black usher Lupin out of the great hall, a hand on the small of his back. Lupin shrugged off the hand and turned to snap at Black. Severus smirked. It seemed his jabs at their deteriorating friendship hadn't been far off the mark. Hardly surprising, if Lily's facts about Lupin's mark had been correct, and Severus couldn't think of any reason to suspect she was lying- she'd gotten annoyingly chummy with the Gryffindor gang. He sighed and rose off the bench at the Slytherin breakfast table to follow Black and Lupin from a distance. It struck Severus as odd that Black was here at all; hadn't he been going to some muggle concert with Lily over the break? And surely Potter's family would have been happy to take Lupin in for Easter- Christian charity, and all that.

No, Black's return to the castle had to mean something. And Severus, determined to find out what, followed them out into the entrance hall.

To his disappointment they didn't seem to be talking at all, just heading towards the staircases. Lupin was still behaving as though he didn't want Black to touch him, and Black looked rather put out by this. Just as Severus was about to follow them upstairs, Black glanced back and saw him. An evil grin split his face, and he made to turn around, but Lupin grabbed his sleeve and jerked him roughly away. Snape watched the pair retreat upstairs and, frowning to himself, headed back to the Slytherin common room to get a start on some new experimental potions he'd been waiting for break to work on. Their unusual behavior would likely reveal itself in good time, and Severus knew when to be patient.

Severus didn't expect to see Black and Lupin again until the rest of the school returned, but he ran into them the next day after dinner. The rain that had characterized the beginning of the break had cleared up Wednesday morning, leaving a light mist which settled over the grounds as the warmth of the day expired. Severus was intending to go out to the forest to harvest some nightblooming primrose- the medicinal powers of the flower were strongest when it was picked during the full moon- and he saw them arguing as he was coming up the stairs out of the dungeons.

They made an impressive pair, Severus had to admit, standing in the doorway of the entrance hall, silhouettes against the setting sun. Black with his broad shoulders and long hair, Lupin small and slight and sharp edged. The glare of the sun prevented him from seeing their facial features but the general tone of the argument was evident from their voices. Severus stepped into an alcove so he could watch and listen without being seen.

"You think you know what it's like? You think you know what any of this has been like?" Remus spat. Black raised his hands defensively.

"Look, I know I've been a prat recently. Marlene and I are well matched and I've been so caught up in that I've missed all these signs with you, but I don't want to lose you and I'm with you one hundred percent tonight. It'll be just like old times, maybe better, because we won't have Wormtail tagging along, or James, it'll just be-"

"Spare me. I don't want you around right now and I'm not sure I'll ever want you around for this again."

Black stretched out a hand to touch Lupin but he took a step back. "Hang on, Moons, I don't-"

"Stop calling me that!" Lupin shouted, grabbing at his own hair before flinging his arms wide. "You're so- this is all a game to you, isn't it, some secret club with codenames and disguises. It's only fun to you because you've got a choice. You don't have to go through that tunnel and repeatedly injure yourself in that damned little building, you don't have to set any store in the *fortis animi* spell, you've got a bloody choice in what you do and in how the world sees you. I don't."

Severus frowned at the two, taken aback. What was Lupin talking about? What had the pair been hiding, and what choice did Black have that Lupin did not? There was the obvious choice between Lupin and the muggleborn girl he'd been marked with- as she had no mark herself she could lay no real claim to him, presenting Black with the option of her or Lupin, if he wished. But Severus got the impression there was more to it than that. What was this talk of clubs and codes, and what tunnel were they speaking of?

Severus's thoughts were interrupted. Lupin was talking again.

"Just... go. I cannot talk about this right now. In a few days I'll be more amiable but tonight I just..."

Black laid a tentative hand on Lupin's shoulder, and he did not shrug it off. For one uncomfortable moment Severus wondered if Black was about to kiss him, but then Professor McGonagall came striding into the entrance hall and the all three boys' attention refocused on her.

"Mr Black, how many times have I told you that I don't wish to see you down here when I come to fetch Mr Lupin?" She looked furious as she headed towards the pair.

"Sorry, professor. I'll be heading back to Gryffindor tower now." He said, dropping his hand from Lupin's shoulder and backing away. Lupin strode outside and sunk onto the top step, wrapping his arms around his knees.

"See that you hurry. Your devotion to your friend is admirable but I really don't think you need to come see him off every time he goes home to visit his mother."

Severus shifted in his alcove. Visiting his mother? That seemed a weak explanation of the conversation he had just overheard, too weak to entertain as the truth. No, Severus thought, watching Black's retreating form, there was something else going on in addition to Lupin's dissatisfaction with his and Black's marks.

A second later, a hand reached into the alcove and pulled Severus firmly into the light.

"Mr Snape, I should have known." McGonagall said dryly. Severus's stomach clenched in anxiety as he stared at her. He was now only a few centimeters shorter than the head of Gryffindor but he doubted that he would cease being intimidated by her even if he towered over her.

"I don't know what you think you are doing, eavesdropping on your fellow students, but I am going to assign you a detention. Please head to my office immediately, I will join you as soon as I apparate Mr Lupin home to see his family." She released his shoulder from her firm grip and glared at him with narrowed eyes. Severus nodded without speaking, his eyes darting to Lupin who was sitting on the steps outside and seemed not to have heard any of this conversation, and then he turned and headed up the stairs, keeping one eye on Black who was a dozen paces ahead of him.

A part of him would have dearly loved to goad Black over what he had just heard, but another part of him was so busy *sorting through* what he had just heard that he thought it best to wait until he had more the facts before springing something on his hated schoolmate.

Several hours later, once he had returned to his dormitory and scrubbed all the trophy polish from his hands, Severus was getting into bed when he remembered the primroses. He was on the point of pulling his robes back on and heading outside when a thought struck him.

Moony. Black and Potter and Pettigrew called Lupin *Moony*. And he'd been going home to see his mother for at least the past three years, because Severus could remember a time second year when he'd overheard them all fighting over whether he'd been telling the truth about that being where he'd gone the previous evening. He'd disappeared with McGonagall on a suspect trip routinely for years, and this one on the full moon, and his friends called him Moony, and he had whinged to Black about not having a choice.

Merlin, Severus thought, and leapt out of bed to sneak to the library, nightblooming primroses and healing draughts forgotten.

By the time the rest of the school returned from break on Sunday, Severus was willing to place

money on the idea that Lupin was a werewolf. It explained his full moon absences, his pallor over the last week, his fight with Black about not having a choice. The only piece of the puzzle Severus didn't have was the comment about the tunnel.

"How was your camping trip?" James said, slapping Sirius on the back as he came into the common room and settled on the couch with his friend. Sirius shrugged, and James frowned and peered more closely at him. "That wasn't really the reaction I was expecting."

Sirius shrugged again and stretched an arm above his head. "The trip was fine, I'm fine, Remus, presumably, is fine, but I wouldn't know because apparently nobody wants to let me in on anything." He glared at James. "Was I really the only one who didn't know that Remus had me for his mark?"

Ah. So that's what this was about. James ran a hand through his hair, messing it up. "I mean, he told me the night of my birthday when I found out I had Snape. Said things don't always work out the way you expect." Sirius snorted.

"And neither of you told me... why?"

James stared at him, trying to think of how to articulate his thoughts. "Well... you kept saying how it didn't really matter, and you were with Marlene, so I guess we just both figured it wasn't information you would have thought was important."

Sirius let out a short laugh. "It's obviously important to Remus, and I'm not sure I understand that."

James tensed up. "I don't think I'm the right person to be having this conversation with, Padfoot. Maybe you need to ask him about it."

Sirius snorted again and started to pick at the threading hanging off the couch. James stared at him for a moment, but he didn't speak again, so James got up and went to start on the homework he'd neglected over break. He was starting to think maybe he'd gotten off easy having a hated enemy for a soulmate.

Over the next several weeks, Severus kept a close eye on the Gryffindor gang. They had a few more run-ins, but none of them resulted in any more lost points or injuries. Lupin had become sulky and silent, neither joining in with the bullying nor exercising his authority as prefect to stop it from happening. Something seemed to have fractured within the group, and Severus suspected that that "something" was the relationship between Black and Lupin.

And then, a week before the next full moon, Black cornered Severus as he descended from the owlery after sending his weekly letter home to his mother. He grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged Severus into an empty classroom at the bottom of the tower. Instantly Severus's wand was out and he was about to cast a stunning spell and run when Black stuck his wand in his pocket and held his hands up.

"I'm not trying to attack you, I want to... talk." He grimaced as though the idea was repugnant. Severus sneered.

"And what does the great Sirius Black have to say to me?"

Black shrugged. Severus did not lower his wand.

"I want to know how far along you are in your research for reversing the *fortis animi* spell."

Severus blinked. That was not what he had been expecting. "Why would I share that information with you?" he asked warily.

"Because for once we both want the same thing? I don't know, Snivellus, I don't really have a compelling argument for you. I want to be able to reverse the spell just as much as you do."

Severus bristled at the nickname and raised his wand a fraction higher. "If you want to work together, *Black*, I advise you start by not calling me by that ridiculous name."

Black rolled his eyes. "Who said anything about working together? I was more thinking that you could tell me what you know so far so I can go and work on the problem myself."

Severus snorted.

"I'm S-"

"Please refrain from making that insipid pun in my presence or I will have no choice but to hex you."

Black grinned. "Lily was right about you, you're actually quite witty."

"I hardly need your approval or admittance of my talents when they are demonstrably true."

"Naturally," Black sniggered, and Severus debated trying that toenail hex on him just to see if the cretin remembered it from third year. But actually, no, there was a better way to go about needling Black than making his toenails grow through his socks and shoes.

"This is about Lupin, yes?"

Black scowled. "Blimey, it really *was* everyone but me who knew, wasn't it?"

Severus curled his lips into a mocking smile. Black glared at him.

"Where do you get off antagonizing me about that when you're in the same situation? We're all stuck with this stupid spell making our lives miserable and you think it's funny to laugh at me specifically?"

"It's quite simple, really, Black. I, unlike you, know what I want and it is decidedly not James Potter. You believed you knew what you wanted until the variable of Remus Lupin was thrown into the mix, and now you are unsure of yourself. I am, in this matter as in most others, better than you."

Black looked furious and took a few steps forward. Severus held his ground, raising his wand and his eyebrows simultaneously.

"Why he persists in torturing the both of you with his pointless pining when you could just sit down and have a little heart-to-heart I cannot understand, but I will not pretend that the mind of Remus Lupin makes a shred of sense."

Black let out a great huff of air. "Don't you dare insult Remus. He's worth a hundred of you." His wand arm visibly tensed and Severus could almost see the internal conflict between hexing Severus silly and remaining calm enough to extract the information for which Black had cornered him. He sighed dramatically.

"I have something you want, do I not? It is most fortunate for you that you have something I want, in return." Severus said, taking care to sound as though he were explaining something very simple to a child.

"Yeah, and what's that?" Black looked ready to punch him, and Severus held the shield charm in his mind for when the moment came.

"I overheard a conversation between you and Mr Lupin several weeks ago, during Easter break." Black's face went white, then red. Severus pressed on. "Some of it puzzled me greatly, other parts," he smirked, "less so. There is but one piece of information I cannot figure out. When Lupin said there was a tunnel and a building he hated visiting, to what was he referring?"

Black laughed without mirth and made to grab Severus by the front of the robes. Severus cast *protego* just in time and watched with satisfaction as Black rebounded.

"That all there is, Snivellus? Do you really want to know?" He was breathing fast. "You know the Whomping Willow on the edge of the grounds?"

Severus frowned. This had taken an unexpected turn. "Yes?"

"There's a big knot on the trunk. Down near the bottom, looks a bit like an eye. Prod it with a long stick next Thursday night and follow the tunnel that opens up underneath of it. It comes out in the building Remus was talking about."

Severus narrowed his eyes. This definitely sounded like some kind of trap but he would worry about that when the day was closer; he would have some sort of weapon prepared for whatever the outcome of venturing down this path may be.

Black attempted to grab him again, made a noise of disgust, and started towards the door of the classroom. "I never want to hear you say a word against Remus Lupin again. He could eat you alive in a fair fight." he shot back from the doorway before striding away up the darkening corridor.

Severus let down his shield with a feeling of triumph. Black had fallen for his taunting and he'd gotten the information he'd wanted without having to reveal his own hand.

Chapter 3

*That's why a little quiver can inscribe a night
into your left breast,*

Severus could feel his earlier confidence slipping away as Thursday neared. He'd perfected a spell to protect himself against whatever he may find, a derivative of the *diffindo* that had managed to injure Potter during the duel the previous month. As always, the incantation had proven to be the most difficult part; most spells that manifested physical phenomena were simple enough to visualize but needed a very definitive epithet to ensure the spell worked the same way every time.

By Wednesday morning Severus had settled on an incantation but had yet to practice it on a living subject- he rather hoped he wouldn't have to, as it would cause a great deal of damage and be very messy, but if his suspicions about Lupin were correct he needed to be ready for what he would find at the end of the tunnel.

Several times over the course of Thursday he attempted to talk himself out of his nighttime plans, but always, in the end, he circled back around to the fact that Potter and his gang were up to something, and Severus had the power to discover what it was and expose them. It may have been reckless, as a small voice in his mind that sounded very like his mother kept reminding him, but he had his wand and the Gryffindors had tormented him for long enough. He had a chance to put a stop to it, and he intended to do just that.

Severus waited until the sun went down and the teachers began their patrol before creeping out of the dungeons during the window when Slughorn was circling the floor above. He hid in an alcove until the potions master had passed and then headed out onto the moonlit grounds. A small thrill of excitement went through him as he hurried over the dew-damp grass. He'd snuck out at night occasionally before, to collect potions ingredients and work on his experiments in secret, but this was different than getting up to brew in the dead of night. This was... an exploratory mission. Discovery of hidden things. Seeing that which he knew he was not supposed to see. With a little jolt of adrenaline, Severus levitated a bit of branch to prod at the knot on the trunk of the willow. The tree froze, Severus grinned briefly up at the immobile branches silhouetted against the sky, and then he headed down and into the passageway.

Sirius shifted uncomfortably on the couch for the dozenth time and James flung down the book he was reading to glare at him. "Will you just go upstairs or out to work on the map or *something* if you're so restless? Remus not wanting us to come along isn't the end of the world and it doesn't mean you need to stay up here doing nothing. You're sulking for no reason."

Sirius huffed. "I can't help it, alright? I'm anxious and I feel bad. He's gonna be alone all night- or, he will be unless Snape decides to show up, not like *that's* any kind of company."

"Snape?" James said sharply. "What are you on about?"

"Didn't I tell you? Old Snivellus has been poking his nose where it doesn't belong again. He overheard, ah, a conversation I was having with Moony the other day and I ended up telling him that if he wants to find out what we're always up to all he needs to do is go through the tunnel

under the Whomping Willow on the full moon. What a laugh, right?" Sirius chuckled and stretched his arms over his head. "If he manages to get out of the castle and through the tunnel without getting caught or pissing himself he'll run into Moony fully transformed. Then he'll *definitely* piss himself, and serves him right for making insinuations about our Moony." He nodded a self-satisfied nod.

James stared, his expression of horror growing with every word Sirius spoke. "You sent Snape after Moony because he... insinuated something about him?"

"Yeah. Said he was a pouf. Well, as good as. Said he was pining over me." A brief flicker of hurt crossed his face for a moment but then he shrugged. "But in any case, it's not that big of a deal. Chances are he won't even make it out of the castle without getting caught. You remember how dead clumsy-"

"You moron." James spat. "He might have been clumsy when we all came to Hogwarts but he's not been for a year or more, it's probably all that duelling Slytherin house does. And he's stubborn as hell, he's still friends with Evans all these years later and he's still researching how to break this spell that's been around for centuries. He's not likely to back down because he's scared or because it's risky, and if he makes it through to Moony, Moony'll kill him. He won't be able to stop himself." James's mind was moving at lightning speed and he quickly realized that the only thing he could do to prevent a catastrophe was to go down and intercept Snape before he could make it to the Shrieking Shack. Anything else risked exposing the marauders as animagi and Sirius as the one who'd sent Snape down there. James dashed upstairs and grabbed the cloak from under his mattress. When he came back down Sirius was standing by the portrait hole, looking determined.

"No, you're staying here." James said angrily. "You've done enough already." He pulled the cloak on. "And Remus *is* pining, you insensitive twat. Stop lying to yourself. He's been in love with you since second year." And with that he headed out the portrait hole and sprinted off into the dark.

Snape felt like he'd been walking along the tunnel for a very long time. Shortly after entering and realizing how dark it was and how narrow the walls were, he'd begun to get uncomfortable. As he headed further and the passage became narrower, he grew anxious. When he spotted a glimmer of light ahead he began to run, only to hear snarling and whining ahead. He stopped dead, his heart pounding in his chest.

When he felt a hand clamp down on his wrist, he nearly cried out. He did shoot the new spell backwards over his shoulder, but it missed his attacker and gouged into the wall, covering them both in a cascade of dirt.

"Calm down, Snape, it's me. James Potter."

"What the *hell* do you think you are *doing*?" Severus snarled, turning to face him.

"Getting you out. It's not safe to be down here. I know Sirius thought it was a laugh, knowing you couldn't leave well enough alone but-" Potter swallowed heavily, "we need to go."

Snape jerked his wrist out of Potter's grasp. "What concern is it of yours what I do? Since when have you cared what happens to me?"

"...Merlin, Snape, I know we hate each other but you can't think I'd want you dead." He looked at Severus pleadingly, his eyes wide in the dark, and Severus recoiled.

He turned back to the light which yielded the exit to the tunnel, red pounding behind his eyes. "Try and stop me." he muttered. Taking a deep breath he raised himself up through the hole and found himself face to face with the werewolf.

He inhaled sharply. Severus had known, in his mind, what he would find when he followed the passage, but his gut had not been prepared for the reality of it. It towered over him, drool dripping from its maw, claws long as the old-fashioned muggle razors his father used to shave. It turned its inhuman eyes on him, and Severus's brain finally snapped into action. He whipped his wand at the thing, his spell on his lips. *Sectumsempra*.

Always cut.

The werewolf howled and recoiled as gashes appeared in its fur, a crisscrossing web of wounds that began to leak blood. It did not deter the monster from sprinting towards him, and Severus raised his wand again-

And felt his footing slide out from under him as Potter gave a great wrenching tug on his legs. He tumbled down the hole, the werewolf making to follow, but rebounding on a glimmering shield of magic held aloft by Potter's wand.

"Run!" Potter shouted, pushing him onehandedly down the passageway as he maintained the shield with the other. Severus did not need telling twice. He set off at a sprint, scraping the cold earth against his shoulder or knuckles as he ran. He could hear Potter's breathing behind him, and behind that, the growling, slobbering sounds of the werewolf.

When at last they burst out from underneath the Whomping Willow, Severus felt momentarily weak with relief before he realized the beast was still pursuing them. He turned back, and for a moment locked eyes with Potter as the werewolf loomed behind him.

Potter looked stricken. Then he raised his wand. Before Severus had time to react, Potter stunned him.

James didn't have time to watch Snape collapse. He was already transforming, twisting to meet Remus head-on as he turned into the stag. His front hooves hit the ground just as Remus rose onto his hind legs.

With a quick glance behind him to make sure he didn't step on the git, James backed up until he was standing over Snape's motionless body. He braced his legs and inclined his head to push his antlers forward, never breaking eye contact with his transformed friend. Remus considered him for a moment, then dropped back down onto all fours. With a surge of triumph and relief, James jerked his nose forward towards the distant trees and watched as Remus slunk away, maintaining his protective position over Snape until his friend was lost in the shadows of the Forbidden Forest. Then he relaxed slightly, stepping above Snape and turning to look down at him.

James sighed internally. His rival was much smaller than he seemed when he was conscious. It'd be a simple enough matter to move him back to the castle in human form; James could definitely carry his weight. But he had no way to ensure that Remus wouldn't come back for them, especially with the threat of being gored on James's antlers gone. He wasn't keen to repeat the standoff- the added time it'd take him to transform if he had to put Snape down first didn't bode well in his favor. But nor did his chances of successfully getting Snape onto his back in deer form. For a brief moment James cursed himself for telling Sirius to stay behind. Pads might have less emotional intelligence than your average toddler but he was strong as hell and more than able to lift an

unconscious body onto the back of an eight foot deer.

Several minutes of silent swearing and a bump James was sure Snape would feel the next day later, James had managed to hoist him limply onto his back. He set off at a trot for the castle, thinking that if deer could grumble he'd be doing so loud enough to wake even a magically unconscious Slytherin.

*a day into your right. Can shave below the skin,
and write in ink seed, thine.*

Severus skipped potions the next morning for the first time in his life. He didn't think he could stand to be in the same room with James Potter, even if their antagonism was mediated by a period of brewing under Slughorn's watchful eye. He was too angry to focus on anything even alone in his empty dorm, reduced to pacing in circles and glaring around at the blank and windowless walls. He was positive that in proximity to Potter and his little friends, he'd do something he'd regret. Potter had saved his life, and that was simply not to be borne considering it had been Potter's friends that had threatened it in the first place. With a snarl Severus grabbed his bag and left for the library.

He'd had enough, he thought angrily as he strode through the hallways. The foursome had made his life a living hell for five years. He'd done all he could to fight back but he might as well have left them hex him for all the good it had done. They'd nearly killed him and when he'd woken up in the headmaster's office after being stunned on the grounds by Potter, he'd received a telling off for snooping and what amounted to blackmail to not reveal anything he'd learned about Lupin. Dumbledore had said that if word ever got out about Lupin's "condition" Severus would be the first person he would suspect as culprit. The veiled threat of expulsion if word of Lupin's status as a teenage werewolf spread rang loud and clear to Severus he was sent off to bed. It wouldn't be Black who was expelled, Black who had sent Severus after the werewolf; it wouldn't be Lupin, who had nearly ripped Severus and Potter to shreds; it wouldn't be Pettigrew, who despite dating one of Lucius's old flings and spending an awful lot of time around the Slytherins recently had never seen fit to come to Severus's aid or intervene in his friends' bullying; and it most certainly wouldn't be Potter, who had probably orchestrated this entire operation so that he could burst in and save Severus for... some reason. There had to be a reason even if Severus didn't see it- in the years Severus had known Potter, the other boy had never done a single decent thing for anybody unless there was something in it for himself.

Reaching the library at last, Severus flung himself down in a secluded table near the back and began to spread out his notes and resources on the *fortis animi* spell out in front of him. He was beginning to despair of ever finding a solution, but thinking about anything was preferable to thinking about Potter right now. And anyway, he had learned a great deal of interesting magical theory even if none of it was proving fruitful to his specific line of research.

He had taken Lily's comment about magic being a deep and integral part of one's being to heart and had been looking in books about the origins of magic or ideas about how magic was connected to a person. Everything he read, from the ancient philosophers onward, seemed to point towards the idea that there was no way to truly determine the difference between magic and non-magic people except to put them into a situation where they might perform magic and see what happened. There was no evidence of magic as a physical trait which could be observed separate from observing the act of magic, no "gene" for it as he'd heard his parents once discuss. The philosopher Iamblichus even went so far as to say that magic, as evidence of the divine living among man, would necessarily show no physical signs because man was formed in the image of God and therefore muggles would have to be indistinguishable from the wizards who had originally created

them. Severus found this particular line of thinking to be tiresome but could not deny that as far as he could tell all other wizards throughout history had agreed with Iamblichus's conclusion, if not with the initial premise about God.

Magic, as far as the dominant thread of academia was concerned, was simply a power some possessed and some did not. Nobody seemed to be able to say from whence it came or where it was located within a person. There were occasional obscure reference to a text on or possibly by Circe which talked about the way magic within a person could be manipulated to force that person to change shape, but as far as Severus could tell the manuscript had been lost sometime in the 1100s.

A sudden creak brought Severus back to his surroundings. He dropped his quill and gripped the handle of his wand inside his robes pocket. "Who's there?" he demanded, sitting up as straight and tall as his unfortunate stature would allow. James Potter stepped from behind the bookshelf that blocked Severus's table from view of the rest of the library.

Severus made to stand and pull his wand out of his pocket. Potter immediately raised his hands beside his face. "I'm here on friendly terms."

"Friendly?" Severus sneered. "Since when have we ever been friendly?"

"We haven't," Potter said. Severus raised his eyebrows as he rushed on, "but I'd like to be. The stuff that's been happening recently, it's made me realize that maybe we've gone too far and it might be better to draw a truce now before somebody gets seriously hurt."

"The stuff that's been happening." Severus repeated his words flatly, narrowing his eyes.

"Yeah. The whole thing with the Whomping Willow. That was out of line, even for Sirius."

"And yet it does not appear that he is nearby to apologize himself."

Potter looked anxious. "He's having a really rough time lately, with Remus and Marlene and his family."

"I see. You are here to make excuses for him." Severus rolled his eyes and began gathering up his notes and packing them away into his bag.

"No, I'm here to apologize on his behalf. Remus might be the prefect but it's always been me who's kept the three of them in line. I feel responsible for what happened on Thursday night." Potter leaned against the bookshelf and scuffed a shoe against the floor. Severus straightened up and shouldered his bag.

"You wish me to absolve you of your guilt, is that it?"

"No! Yes. Maybe." Potter said, jerking his head up to look at Severus. "I want this thing to die. I want us to agree to avoid each other with the understanding that I'll make sure the others leave you alone as well."

"What do you want from me in return?"

Potter took a deep breath and nodded towards Severus's bag. "I want access to your research on *fortis animi*."

Severus snorted. "You're the second one of your little gang to request as much. Black cornered me with the same request just last week. I have to wonder what you all find so important about it."

James scowled. "Don't play dumb, Snape. It's made a mess of my group of friends and I'd like to fix it. Sirius feels the same even if he's hopeless at thinking through his emotions."

"Most unfortunately for you, Potter, I do not care about whatever petty drama might be going on amongst the Gryffindors. In any case I fear the material might be far above your comprehension."

Potter turned red. "I'll have you know that I'm sitting eleven OWLs this year. I think I can keep up."

"I rather doubt it." Severus made to walk past him, but Potter caught his arm.

"Please. I know you have no reason to trust me, but—"

"Correct. I have no reason to trust you. Now let me go and do not disturb me here again. How did you even know to find me here?"

Potter frowned. "Lily—"

"Ah." Severus said, feeling his blood start to pound in his ears even as his heart dropped into his stomach. "I see."

And he fled.

James watched Snape's hasty retreat with annoyance and regret. He didn't see what the problem was- he'd extended a hand in, if not exactly friendship, then at least a sort of ceasefire to their previous animosity. Snape was supposed to take him up on the offer and together they were supposed to figure out how to fix the growing rift amongst the Marauders because of that stupid soulmate spell. James hadn't really anticipated him storming off but now it had happened he couldn't help but feel like it might have been inevitable. It was Snape, after all, and perhaps it was just too little, too late. It was entirely possible that whatever chance there might have been for some kind of de-escalation of hostilities had died the other night when Sirius sent Snape down to the willow. James sincerely hoped not, for the sake of his friends and himself alike.

Shaking his head, James left the library for Divination, making a mental note to sit down and have a talk with the others about Snape. If he was going to make any progress in his goal of setting things right amongst them the first step had to be getting everyone to stop being so hostile towards Snape; they might not actually need him to figure out how to undo the spell, but if Sirius had gone to him for the same reason he might be able to get Sirius to acknowledge that they were all working towards the same goals. And anything that might keep Sirius from doing something as pigheaded as he'd done the other night, James thought grimly, could only be a good thing.

Severus waited for Lily after Herbology and met her by the forest as she got out of Care of Magical Creatures. She sent him a sunny smile which he couldn't help but mirror just slightly, feeling his lips quirk up against his will even as he crossed his arms more tightly around himself.

"Sev! What's up, you're looking far too grumpy for what a beautiful day it is." Lily gestured around at the sky, which was a brilliant shade of blue, and the daisies which littered the grass in front of the trees. Severus shrugged and opened his mouth to speak but quickly closed it again as Lily's classmates began flooding past. Lily rolled her eyes and tugged at his arm, nudging him into a more relaxed position. "You really don't need to look like that, I'm sure whatever's happened isn't as bad as you think." She stood with him and watched the mix of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws

filter their way towards the castle before starting off in the same direction. Severus felt a little flutter of appreciation that she'd let them get some way ahead and was annoyed with himself. He'd come over here to be angry at her, after all.

"I was just wondering why you saw fit to share our spot in the library with Potter."

Lily glanced over at him with her eyes narrowed and shifter her bag on her shoulder. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Severus kept his eyes focused on the path in front of him as he spoke next. "I was in the library earlier, back behind the stacks on medieval remedies, and Potter came to harass me. When I asked him how he knew to find me there, he said he knew of the spot from you."

Lily didn't speak for a full minute. When Severus looked over at her she was staring straight ahead with a small smile on her face. Severus's mouth went very dry.

Lily stepped through the arch into the courtyard and Severus followed, barely resisting the impulse to grab her shoulder and snap at her.

Lily glanced back at him over her shoulder as they entered the courtyard and slowed her pace until he was standing beside her again. "He wondered why you weren't in potions, and he asked me where to find you so I told him."

Severus felt like he'd been hit in the stomach with an expulsion charm. It felt like a betrayal, the worst kind of betrayal, for his closest friend to have told *James Potter* where he went to be alone, where *they* went to study or read or whisper together.

"How could you do that? How could you go and tell somebody like him- oh but I forgot, you *like* him and his mates, don't you?" Severus didn't bother to keep the sneer out of his voice. Lily, predictably, bristled.

"Yeah, I do. They're a damn sight more enjoyable than your *Slytherin* friends seem to be."

Severus frowned in confusion. "I thought we were supposed to be friends? Best friends?" Why would she care about not being included amongst Severus's other, mostly of convenience type friends when she was the most important to him?

"We *are*, Sev, but I don't like some of the people you're hanging out with! I'm sorry, but I detest Avery and Mulciber! *Mulciber!*" Lily gave an exaggerated shudder. "What do you see in him, Sev, he's creepy! D'you know what he tried to do to Mary McDonald the other day?" She stopped in front of the fountain and leaned against one of the crumbling pillars holding up the cupola that covered it.

An image of Mulciber using *levicorpus*, Severus's own spell which he'd invented last year when he'd been teaching himself nonverbal spells and which had somehow gotten around the school, flashed to his mind. "That was nothing. It was a laugh, that's all-"

It was Dark Magic, and if you think that's funny..."

Severus felt a jolt at the knowledge that Lily thought the spell he'd invented had been Dark. He'd intended nothing of the kind from it, viewed it as a defensive spell to use when Potter and the rest attacked him. How she could view anything he did as Dark magic and not view their bullying in the same light was beyond him. "What about the stuff Potter and his mates get up to?" Severus could feel his face turning red with indignation.

“What’s Potter got to do with anything?” Lily scowled, and Severus sat down on the edge of the fountain and drifted a hand through the cold water, trying to organize his thoughts. If ever there was a time to tell somebody about what had happened the previous Thursday, this was it. Lily would keep the secret if he asked, and better still, it might persuade her to look at the lot of them in a more cautious light. Still, he had as good as promised Dumbledore not to reveal what he’d discovered about Lupin. And yet...

“they sneak out at night. There’s something weird about that Lupin.” Severus flicked his eyes up from the water to glance at Lily, judging her expression. “Where does he keep going?”

Lily looked exasperated. “They say he’s ill-“

“Every month on the full moon?”

“I know your theory.” Severus forced himself not to wince at her tone. Lily must have noticed, because her next words were more gently spoken. “Why are you so obsessed with them? Why do you care what they’re doing at night?”

For a split second, they stared into each other’s eyes, Lily looking down at where Severus sat still trailing his hand in the water. “I’m just trying to show you they’re not as wonderful as everyone seems to think they are.”

Lily, oddly, blushed, and looked away back out the arch and across the grounds. “They don’t use Dark magic, though.” She sat down on the fountain’s edge beside him, still looking out over the grounds. “And you’re being really ungrateful. I heard what happened the other night. You went sneaking down that tunnel by the Whomping Willow, and James Potter saved you from whatever’s down there.”

Severus stood up abruptly, incensed beyond words. “Saved?” he shrieked, not caring for the moment how high and shrill his voice had gone. “Saved?” Of course, of bloody course Potter had spread the story around to all his little friends up in Gryffindor tower by now. “You think he was playing the hero?” Severus had thought so too, in the immediate aftermath, but after the conversation with Potter that morning had arrived at a different conclusion. Potter didn’t care whether Severus lived or died, he only cared about his own group of friends and their well-being and unity in the face of a common enemy. “He was saving his own neck and his friends’, too!” An awful thought rose in Severus’s mind, concerning Lily’s recent increasing ties with the gang of boys and her uncharacteristic coldness towards him. “You’re not going to- I won’t let you-“ but the words wouldn’t come.

And now Lily was standing as well, her voice raised to match his. “*Let me? Let me?*” She narrowed her eyes and Severus shut his, realizing his mistake.

“I didn’t mean- I just don’t want to see you made a fool of-“ Severus spluttered, cursing himself for his lack of composure as he did so. “He fancies you, James Potter fancies you!” Wonderful. That had not been at all what he’d meant to say. “And he’s not... everyone thinks... big quidditch hero...” Merlin, this was not helping matters. Severus forced himself to stop talking, turning his back on Lily’s raised eyebrows and taking several deep breaths as he stared at the water bubbling on the fountain.

“I know James Potter’s an arrogant toerag.” Lily said, in a tone that might have been soothing if it wasn’t so icy. “I don’t need *you* to tell me that. But Mulciber’s and Avery’s idea of humor is just evil. *Evil*, Sev. I don’t understand how you can be friends with them.”

Severus shook his head. He had no possible hope of explaining to Lily the role Mulciber and

Avery played in his life, Lily who was so loved and admired by her whole house and had a loving family. Severus had nobody except those he had been able to ingratiate himself to with his academic knowledge. They walked back to the castle in silence, Lily looking pensively ahead and Severus following her with a litany playing in his mind over his whirling thoughts about Lily, Potter's gang, and his own housemates. *Don't leave me*, he pleaded with her silently. *Don't ever leave me.*

Sirius clapped James on the back as they sat down to eat in the Great Hall that evening. "What a great practice, eh? We're going to absolutely clobber Ravenclaw this weekend."

James nodded as he loaded potatoes onto his plate, glancing around for Remus and Peter. Truthfully his mind was a long way from quidditch. He almost sighed in relief when he saw the other two marauders heading up the hall towards them- he'd gotten so used to Peter's absence recently that he'd been sure he'd have to go looking for the fourth of their group.

When the last two sat down James leaned in and said in a low voice, "We all need to talk somewhere private this evening. Let's go to that room Remus found after dinner."

Peter and Sirius looked confused but nodded. Remus, however, cleared his throat, not taking his eyes off his food.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not?" James snapped.

"You want to talk about what happened on Thursday, correct?"

James huffed. "Yes. I think we all need to, including you, Moony."

Remus shrugged, not looking up. "If you insist. But I will not be held accountable for anything I may say or do if you force me to come."

James tensed. That was very unlike Remus, who was ordinarily responsible to a fault. He didn't question it though; there would be time for that later, when this was all sorted out.

An hour later the four boys were standing on the seventh floor in front of the Come-And-Go room, as Remus had told them it was called after he'd discovered it's existence by accident one day during their second year. He flat out refused to be the one to summon it into being this evening, however. James shrugged it off, determined to ignore his friend's bad mood as it was rather justified. Instead, James himself walked back and forth opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, thinking hard about what kind of space he wanted. Somewhere cozy and non-threatening, small enough to force the four to look at each other but not so small that it felt stifling. Somewhere they could talk comfortably.

When the door appeared and Sirius pushed it open, James was pleased to see that it greatly resembled their favorite section of the Gryffindor common room, the large squashy chairs and the couch in front of the fire. There was no other furniture in the room but there were several windows which looked out into the night sky. James squinted at them. He was fairly sure that this room could only have one exterior wall and yet there were windows on three sides. He also was nearly certain it was not raining outside the castle. The magic of the room and the choices it made never ceased to amaze him.

Peter let out a pleased sound as they settled in front of the fire- there were a few pairs of toasting

tongs and a basket of breads. He settled in front of the fire and began toasting a crumpet. Sirius snorted at him and flung himself into an armchair. James sat down on the couch and, after a brief moment where his eyes roved around the room, Remus joined him.

"So what's this all about, Prongs?" Sirius asked, stretching his arms above his head and yawning.

"Snape." James said evenly. Remus shot him a look, Peter tensed at the shoulders, and Sirius rolled his eyes.

"What about old Snivellus? Gotten used to having him on your arm, have you? Decided to attempt to woo him?"

"Don't be obtuse, Sirius, it really doesn't suit you." Remus snapped. James shot Sirius a glare which succeeded in cutting off his response.

"No. I think we all know why we're having this conversation, but I'll spell it out just in case. What happened last Thursday was unacceptable."

Silence met these words, broken only by Peter pulling the tongs out of the fire and transferring his toasted crumpet to a napkin and covering it with a pat of butter pulled from the basket.

James looked around at them all, carefully organizing his thoughts into words. "Remus could have killed Snape. What kind of position would that have put him in?"

"Might have been worth it, to get shot of him forever." Sirius said, a very ugly look on his face.

"Oh yes, getting rid of a school nemesis would most definitely be worth my expulsion and likely ostracism from society." Remus responded, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"Oh, c'mon Moony, Dumbledore would never let that happen--"

"And what power would he have to stop the board of governors if they found out about my condition?"

Sirius fell silent.

James looked between his friends, Remus who looked ready to breathe fire and Sirius who seemed properly cowed about the situation for the first time.

After a few moments of silence, Remus turned away and looked at James instead. "Is this why you called us here? Because if it is, I really must get back to the common room and get started on that essay about everlasting elixirs."

James sighed. "No, that's only sort of why I thought we should do this." Remus looked very annoyed, as he usually did when James attempted to beat around the bush with him. "I think we all need to have a talk about, erm... our friendship." Remus tutted, and James glared at him.

Remus got up from his seat and moved to sit by Peter in front of the fire. "Pass me those tongs if you're finished, Wormtail." James looked to Sirius for support, but Sirius was watching Remus lick crumbs from his right hand as he maneuvered the tongs over the flames with the left one.

"Right." He said, louder than he'd intended. "It's just that I wonder if the thing that's going on with Snape is being exacerbated by other strains within our group."

"What a brilliant analysis, Doctor Freud." Remus said coldly from in front of the fire. James gritted

his teeth.

"I don't know what that means, but I'd appreciate it if you could try to take this seriously."

"I can assure you, I'm taking this very seriously." Remus said. "You think that things have gotten worse with Snape because of what's going on with me and Sirius."

James shrugged and glanced sideways at Sirius, who had sat up in his chair so fast that he looked liable to fall out of it. "Well, yeah."

"Have you stopped to think about the possibility that it might be what's going on between *you and Snape* that's making things worse?" Remus said.

James considered this. "No. I mean, kind of, it boils down to the same problem. The four of us are all being adversely affected by the ramifications of the soulmate spell." When Remus didn't say anything, James plowed on. "Snape is working on a way to undo it. He's been researching stuff in the library for months. I know none of us like him very much, but it might be good if we could all work together. It'd be something in common, a common goal, and it might help to ameliorate some of the tension between us all to know we're doing everything we can to fix the problem."

Nobody said anything for a long time. Sirius kept looking between James and Remus, who was still facing the fire. Peter began toasting another crumpet.

"So... what do you think?" James said, uncertain again.

"I think you've lost your bloody mind if you expect us to work with Snape." Sirius said.

"Yeah." Peter chimed in, speaking for the first time since they'd entered the room. "I know the *fortis animi* has been causing problems for everyone, but... we invented the map. We learned how to be animagi. We don't need his help."

James frowned. "No, I know, but he's got nearly a term's worth of a head start on us and it might be better to work together, at least until we've got an idea of what's going on magically. Then we can start to reverse it."

Remus stood up. "I'd like to talk to Sirius alone. James, Peter, clear out."

James's eyes widened. Peter shrugged and stood up, brushing crumbs off his hands and setting the tongs against the mantle.

"That's a good idea." Sirius said, his voice a growl of anger. James stood up at the same time Sirius did, prepared to step between him and Remus should the need arise, but to his surprise neither moved forward. James lowered his outstretched hands.

"Just don't do anything rash, either of you."

"Of course not." Sirius said, still in the low voice. Remus didn't say anything for several seconds, but when James continued to peer at him with his eyebrows raised, he shook his head.

"I just want to talk in private, James. We're not going to hurt each other, I swear."

James looked back at Sirius for confirmation from him. He nodded. "Yeah, no violence. It's probably about time we had a conversation."

James didn't know what exactly he expected Sirius and Remus to be like when they returned to the common room, but whatever he expected, it certainly wasn't what he got. The two were acting strangely formal with each other, polite, reserved, but with none of the undercurrent of resentment which had characterized their behavior over the last several months. When Sirius went up to bed, Remus moved to sit with James and the two of them compared notes for the Arithmancy homework. As James was packing his stuff into his bag to head to bed, stopped him with gesutre to sit back down.

"I reckon you should talk to Snape on your own, you know." He said, and there was an understanding look in his eyes that James wasn't sure how to interpret. "I don't think Sirius will be persuaded to work with him on reversing the spell."

"Right." James said, frowning. "Are you two okay again, then?"

Remus sighed. "As we'll ever be."

James rubbed his eyes. It was far too late at night to try and pick apart that statement. He'd done what he could to fix the Marauders, at least for the time being. He'd approach Snape again the next day, but in the mean time, he needed sleep.

Chapter 4

*But when I think I've ripped the surface
to the pith, queen substance,
when I've diagrammed the cry.*

As the days grew longer and warmer, Severus found that he hardly had time to work on research of any kind that wasn't purely academic; OWLs were approaching rapidly. There was barely time to spare a thought for the fact that James Potter seemed to be keeping his word and ensuring that his gang let Severus be, let alone devote hours to pouring over books to reverse the soulmate spell. Severus felt a bit put off by this, as he certainly wouldn't be able to continue his research over the summer- there was no way Madam Pince would be persuaded to loan him half the contents of the magical history stacks and no way he could risk taking them back to Cokeworth and within sight of his father. He resigned himself to spending several nights sneaking round the castle to get to the library, since there was no way he'd have either time or privacy to do so during the day.

He was also somewhat neglecting his friendship with Lily, but there was nothing to be done. There simply weren't enough hours in the day to do all the pre-exam homework, attend classes, and also make time to socialize with somebody. And they'd see each other over the summer. Maybe they could take the portable turntable she'd gotten him down to the park by the river, get out of the stifling heat of their respective houses. Or rather, Severus could get out of the heat of *his* house and Lily could get away from her sister; Petunia had been unbearable last summer and Severus didn't anticipate her improving after having graduated from her muggle school in the upcoming month. It would be nice, like old times, and perhaps Severus could persuade her to talk to him about her uncomfortable friendship with Potter and the others.

To say that things had gone back to normal amongst the marauders would have been false. Things had certainly gotten smoother since James had dragged them into the Come-and-Go Room, but Sirius and Remus's stony silences had been replaced with rather awkward, stilted small talk, and while Peter had resumed spending time with them, he was boisterous and loud in a way he hadn't

been before, as though trying to make up for how far he'd drifted from their group over the past year. All of it, combined with the stress of exams and the way Lily Evans had been acting towards him lately, was making James very uneasy. It would have been a relief to bump into Snape and vent some frustration in one of their little duels, but if James wanted to make any headway toward working with Snape to reverse the soulmate spell, he knew better than to cross him while everyone was wound so tightly over the OWLs. And he'd been serious when he'd told Snape that things had gone too far with the prank Sirius had pulled with the Willow. It was time to start putting the past behind them, and James knew that if they were to do that, he needed to make a good faith effort to leave Snape alone for a while.

This resolution was going rather well, James thought, except for the situation with Evans. Ever since that potions class that Snape had missed, the class where he'd asked her where he might find him, she'd been oddly eager to talk to James about her Slytherin friend. James wasn't sure what to make of it. During the herbology practical she'd volunteered to work with him, and his heart had skipped in his chest at first before she pulled her bag of dragon dung over to his pots of Chomping Cabbages and started asking him if he'd talking to Snape about "what was going on between them".

"What do you mean, 'what's going on between us'?" he'd said, pulling on his protective gloves.

Evans rolled her eyes. "You know what I'm talking about. Have you two been doing any work together on the *fortis animi* spell?"

"No." James said shortly. "Why do you ask?"

Lily didn't answer for a while, instead gently knocking dirt from the roots of the shrivelfig she was repotting. After a short while she said, "I worry about him, is all."

"In what way?"

"Oh, you know the kind of people he hangs out with. I don't think they're very good for him and I think he'd benefit from having some other friends. If the two of you got along, we might get him to warm up to Sirius and Remus and Peter and the rest of our friends, as well."

James was momentarily shocked by the fact that Lily Evans considered the marauders to be their mutual friends, but not nearly as shocked as he was by hearing from the girl he liked that she wanted them all to get along with Severus Snape. He had agreed to cease their antagonistic relationship, that didn't mean he'd want Snape around and it certainly didn't mean he'd want to have to compete for Evans's affection with somebody she'd known since before Hogwarts.

James opened his mouth to say some of what he was thinking but all that came out was a huffed, "Merlin."

Evans bristled. "Severus is hopeless at dealing with other people and he spends too much time thinking about Dark magic but he's got a good heart."

James couldn't help smiling a little at that as he glanced across at Evans. "You're so trusting, it's sort of sweet."

She scowled at him and the expression was so like Snape's for a moment that James recoiled. "Whereas you think you're charming but you're really just incredibly arrogant." She snapped. James shrugged, giving the conversation up as lost. He resolved to try again with Snape, though, if not for the sake of reversing the spell that connected them, then at least for the sake of appeasing Evans.

James kept one eye on Snape all through dinner, waiting for him to get up from the Slytherin table and leave so he could follow. He wasn't really paying attention to the last-minute DADA study-session Remus had pre-emptively started over treacle; he was pretty confident about the exam the next day and anyway Remus would almost certainly continue going over notes in the common room later.

When Snape finally stood up, snatching his bag off the table and gesturing for one of his classmates to sit back down when he made to rise, James got to his feet as well.

"Aren't you going to finish that?" Sirius asked, pointing at James's pudding with his spoon.

"No, have it if you want. I'll meet you back in the common room." He said. Sirius shrugged, but James was already walking away, following Snape as he headed out of the Great Hall and off into a side corridor.

"Hey, Snape. I want to talk to you." James said, making sure to stand far enough back that his gesture couldn't be construed as threatening. Snape looked back over his shoulder, slowed his walk, and turned.

"If this is about the *fortis animi* spell again, I should inform you that I've ceased work on it for time being, seeing as we have exams." He sneered. "Not that you would have noticed. I'm sure you've had more important things to think about than academics. Isn't the last quidditch match of the season this weekend?"

James narrowed his eyes but refused to rise to the taunt. "It was last weekend, actually. We beat Hufflepuff and won the cup. Third year running."

"Ah. Well." Snape shifted his bag on his shoulder. "What is it you want, then, if not to badger me about my research?" He looked extremely suspicious.

"Well, it's... sort of related to that." James admitted. "Last time we spoke I told you I'd get my friends off your back."

"Do you expect some kind of repayment for encouraging your fellow Gryffindors to treat me with common human decency?"

James clenched his teeth. "No, you git. I... oh, hell, forget it. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Nor do I, as you have entirely failed to say anything of value. I'll thank you not to waste my time in the future." Snape turned and made to walk away, but James strode forward and grabbed his shoulder.

"Evans is worried about you. About the people you hang out with."

Snape stood perfectly still, and James held his position with his hand on Snape's shoulder. There was a kind of ringing in his ears in the silence, and after a moment he removed his hand.

"Oh? And did you think that I needed your attention to save me from their influence? Or was that also 'Evans' idea?"

"Don't be a- Evans cares about you, god knows why, and I care about her."

"And neither one of you have even the slightest understanding of the situation I am in!" Snape

hissed, whirling back to face James. His robes flared out around his ankles. "Mudbloods and purebloods, there's no difference in Gryffindor, is there? You're all so blinded by your insipid idealism, you can't be bothered to see past the end of your nose."

"Don't know how you can see past yours." James quipped, indicating Snape's over-large beak.
"And don't use that word."

"You fool." Snape said softly. "There is too much at stake for me to turn down the connections I have made amongst my housemates. I don't expect you to understand, you or Lily. But I *do* expect you to understand that *I have suffered too much* from you and your little friends to take any offer of friendship from you now."

"So I missed my chance?" James said in a forced casual tone, leaning against the wall.

Snape laughed dryly. "By five years, Potter."

James shrugged. "Okay. I only asked for Evans. I've always thought you were a lost cause, it's only a matter of time before Evans realizes it as well. If you want to continue hanging out with your Death Eater pals, so be it." James straightened up. He could feel his pulse speeding up and his face starting to burn with anger. "But I want you to know that when it comes down to it, we're enemies. If this is the choice you're going to make, I don't owe you anything, even if we are marked for each other."

"Goodbye, Potter." Snape spat, with a look of pure hatred.

He strode off for the dungeons and James, watching him go, clenched his fist to stop from reaching for his wand.

All in all, even with that ludicrous conversation with Potter and how little sleep he'd been getting what with sneaking off to the library most nights, Severus thought the first week of exams was going rather well. All that remained was the Defense practical after lunch and then Ancient Runes on Friday, and then he'd have the weekend to get back to research before the following week. Potions was on Monday and he hardly needed to study for that; in fact, the only thing he felt warranted any extra attention during the second week was Transfiguration and that wasn't until Wednesday. In any case, the written exam Severus had been most worried about had now finished, and he had some time between now and lunch to look over the questions once again, just to be sure he had understood everything correctly.

He headed out of the Great Hall with his exam paper, following the flow of students outside to the grounds. The sun was very bright in his eyes, too bright to continue staring at a bit of parchment. He settled down amidst a clump of bushes as he finished rereading the exam questions. He thought he had done alright, even with that essay about the origins and uses of shield charms. He was still a bit shaken over the werewolf question; not only had he researched in order to out Lupin, he'd seen the transformation firsthand, and writing out the details of identifying a werewolf had reminded him harshly of that experience. He now felt sick as he thought about it again, but of course he was hungry and overtired and had just been writing for an hour and a half in a hot room, and he didn't give it much thought. All the same, perhaps he should visit the hospital wing for a draught. It would not do to lose his head during the practical exam.

With this thought, Severus stood up and shoved his paper into his bag, making to head towards the castle.

‘All right, Snivellus?’ James Potter shouted from somewhere behind him. Severus’s stomach flipped unpleasantly as he drew his wand and whirled around. How he could have managed to miss the Gryffindors sitting together twenty meters away was beyond him; he evidently needed that draught.

Before Severus could react further, Potter had his wand out and had disarmed Severus. Then he cast the Impediment Jinx, and Severus would have been shaking with rage had he not been frozen. So much for Gryffindor promises. Had Severus not known already not to trust Potter? And here was the proof that his attempt to extend a hand in friendship had been hollow. Severus had known these things, so why did it sting to watch the four advancing on him, to hear Black mocking his appearance and posture?

“You- wait.” He gasped, glaring up at them, loathing them. “You- just- wait-“ he would repay them every unkindness, every spell, every word... he would leave Hogwarts with power they could not imagine and join the people who would ensure that they could never hurt him again, that nobody could hurt him again. Lucius’s face flashed to his mind. If Lucius was here he would have stopped them, but as he glanced around he saw that there was nobody from Slytherin house nearby, and no help would come to him.

He swore, reaching for his wand, but it was just beyond his reach and the hexes that sprang to his lips had no effect.

“Wash out your mouth.” James said coldly. “*Scourgify.*”

Snape gasped in horror as soap bubbles began to blossom in his mouth, which only made it worse. The substance filled his mouth and nose, and he was surely going to choke.

And then Lily had run up to the four, and the bubbles had vanished, and Potter and Lily were facing off. Severus was hopeful for a moment that she might draw her wand on him, but they were talking almost casually, as though he was not lying there defenseless. Severus’s mind flashed back to what Potter had said the previous night, about how Lily was worried about him, and his sense of betrayal at the pointlessness of this latest attack grew. He grabbed his wand and was on the point of casting a nonverbal *sectumsempra* at Potter when Black drew everyone’s attention back to Severus.

The spell grazed Potter’s face but missed most of his body as Potter whirled around. A moment later Severus was in the air, and his mind flashed back to the first time his spell had been used on him, by Mulciber in their dormitory after he’d shown him the incantation. It had seemed a bit of a laugh then, when they were both full of food from the Halloween feast and passing around some sort of expensive alcohol Flint’s family had sent him for his sixteenth, and Severus had revealed that he’d invented a second spell, *levicorpus*, in addition to the ever-popular *langlock*. It was decidedly less funny now, in the hot summer sun, with a crowd of people watching and the taste of soap still in his mouth, being hung upside down and exposed in front of Lily and the Gryffindors.

Severus looked at Lily, pleadingly, his hair hanging in his eyes- and saw that she was almost smiling. He closed his eyes against this latest injustice, certain he was going to vomit, and when she roared at Potter to let him down and he crumpled to the ground, it was all he could do to breathe deeply and force the bile back down his throat, especially as *locomotor mortis* was cast on him a moment later. He was not really listening to the continuation of her conversation with Potter as he lay there stiff as a board. When the spell was lifted, he struggled to his feet, fighting both the rolling of his stomach and a sense of vertigo that made his vision go black.

“You’re lucky Evans was here, Snivellus.” Potter said, glaring at him. Severus shook his hair out of his eyes and looked at the pair of them with deep disgust.

"I don't need help from filthy little mudbloods like her!" He said, trying and failing to keep his voice from shaking.

Lily blinked, an expression of confusion and hurt on her face. "Fine. I won't bother in future."

"Apologize to Evans!" Potter spat, raising his wand again, but Severus had his own in hand now.

"I don't want you to make him apologize!" Lily shouted, moving to stand between them and in from of Potter. "You're as bad as he is. Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can- I'm surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me sick." And she shoved him hard enough that he stumbled, and hurried away towards the castle.

Severus breathed a small sigh of relief that this awful confrontation was finally over, but a moment later, his wand was gone and he was in the air again.

"Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?" Potter shouted around at the small crowd. Merlin, no... Severus struggled in the air, but there was nothing he could do to get free, and his vision was starting to darken again. A moment later, he had blacked out.

"Good to see you're awake." The matron tutted at him as he opened his eyes. "You've had an awful ordeal."

Severus sat up, or tried to- he was tucked securely into a bed in the hospital wing.

"What happened? Why am I here?" he demanded, wincing at how dry his throat felt and how raspy his voice was.

"James Potter brought you up here shortly before the Defence practical examination. He told me that he and his classmates had played a prank on you which got out of hand, and that you had lost consciousness. You're suffering from dehydration." Severus made to pull the blankets back and get out of bed, but the matron laid a hand on his chest and pushed him gently back down. "I am sorry, Mister Snape, but I absolutely insist that you stay here until I have had time to check you over more thoroughly. I have already spoken with your head of house and the examiners, and they have agreed to let you take the practical Defence exam this Sunday morning. You need to rest, you can't have been getting more than four hours of sleep a night for the past week if my spells are correct, and to have gone through the ordeal you just experienced on top of that..." She clucked and brushed a strand of his hair behind his ear. Severus winced away at the touch. "I'm sorry, dear, I'll leave you be. A house elf will be up with lunch for you shortly, and after that I'll be able to assess whether you're able to leave this evening or if I need to keep you for the night."

The matron decided he mad to stay through the afternoon but could return to his own dormitory that night, for which Severus was greatly relieved. He needed to study for Ancient Runes on Friday and also, after some reflection, he rather thought he should apologize to Lily for what he had called her. But truth be told, the idea of going to the Gryffindor common room, to risk running into Potter or one of his cronies after the humiliation he had suffered at their hands, was too much. And this bed was warm and comfortable, and a house elf had just brought him soup...

James was utterly miserable. At the time, in the aftermath of the conversation in which Snape had basically justified his continued association with Death Eaters by saying James didn't understand because he was too morally simplistic, picking on him had felt like a noble and righteous thing. He hadn't expected him to go limp like that, to crumble to the ground when James let him down from the spell, to lie there as though dead while Remus searched for a pulse. James had carried him up to the castle, for the second time, and spent the evening, for the second time, contemplating the idea that he had nearly caused Snape's death. He'd intended to stop this petty, childish feud. He'd intended to be the bigger person. He'd intended Snape to give him *something*, though, to work with him. Remus's words from months ago floated back into his mind: "Things don't always work out the way we want them to."

He was being selfish in some way, to not be able to meet Snape on his own terms. But he couldn't think, couldn't *know*, what those terms would be, and he had no way of getting Snape to trust him, not now. If James Potter had ever been sure of anything, it was that after the events of that day, Severus Snape would never, ever trust him.

*I remember a quiver is fist
of arrows and the arrows' case, their clothes.*

Severus was let out of the hospital wing just in time to go back to his own dormitory to sleep that night. Instead he spent several hours begging people outside the Gryffindor common room to send Lily out to see him.

"I'm sorry."

"Save your breath."

The rest of the exams went about as well as Severus could have hoped, under the circumstances. He skipped the leaving feast to make some last notes on his research before he was away from it for two months, hoping to prevent as little of it from slipping away from his memory as possible.

He did not see Lily that summer. She never came to Spinner's End, nor to the park between their neighborhoods, and when he went round her place Pentunia told him to leave. The owl he sent her came back with the letter unopened.

Between Lily's radio silence, Tobias's characteristic hostility and Eileen's subsequent withdrawal, and the unusually muggy weather in Cokeworth that summer, Severus was relieved beyond words to leave for Hogwarts at the beginning of September. He refused his mother's offer to accompany him to King's Cross, knowing from experience that the dark circles under her eyes and the way she twisted her hair in her hands that morning did not bode well for her holding up under a trip into muggle London. After promising to write that he had arrived safely, and a quick nod to his father, Severus shouldered his bag and left to walk the two miles to the bus stop.

The welcoming feast was, as ever, an exhausting affair. After months on his own Severus found the crush of so many people a little overwhelming, and found himself staring at the Gryffindor table where Black, Lupin, Pettigrew and Potter were sitting close together, laughing and smiling and obviously much happier to be back together than Severus's nearest tablemates were with him. Lily, he saw, was similarly glad to be back with her fellow Gryffindors, hugging Mary McDonald a little way up the table.

After far too long the houses were dismissed, and Severus took a letter up to the owlery for his mother before heading back down to the dungeons to get ready for bed. He had a full class schedule tomorrow, but a free period the day after that, and was already itching to get back to work on his *fortis animi* research.

The next three months were nearly as solitary as the summer had been for Severus. His schedule consisted of class, research, the occasional night-time potions experiment, and helping his peers with their course work. Some of the younger Slytherins had begun to pay him for tutoring in addition to his ten or so classmates that occasionally paid him to write an essay for them, so he was making slightly more money than the last year. He was no closer to finding out how to take the name off his and Potter's arms, but Potter and his friends seemed to have finally gotten bored of hexing him, and so it was only the occasional spell thrown between them, and usually instigated by Severus if he happened to have a good opening to take a shot down a corridor or across the grounds. It was almost, almost noteworthy that Potter never attacked first.

His routine remained unchanged until the beginning of December, when he received a letter from, of all people, Abraxas Malfoy. He shoved it inside a pocket in his robes, deciding not to open it at breakfast and instead to look at it on his way to Charms later when he was away from the prying eyes of his classmates. There was a small alcove down the Charms corridor that he could hide in to read it in peace.

Later when Severus was safely ensconced in this spot, he ripped open the letter, making note of the Malfoy seal in dark green wax. Evidently this was a letter of some gravity.

Dear Mister Snape,

It has recently come to my attention that your mother, Eileen Snape nee Prince, has died. As entrustee of the Prince estate until your coming of age this January, it has fallen to me to make funeral arrangements. In addition, under the terms of the ministry's Seizure Of Magical Artefacts decree, all of Mrs Snape's possessions must be removed from her house, a process for which I request your presence over the next week. I have already made arrangements with the headmaster for you to be absent from Hogwarts until 11 December, and my son, Lucius, will be there after lunch to side-along Apparate you back to our home where the funeral is being held. We will then begin the process of clearing out your mother's house.

My Most Sincere Apologies For Your Loss,

Abraxas Malfoy

Severus blinked down at the parchment he was grasping between his fingers. He felt it crumple around the edges and blinked, straightening up and putting it back in his pocket. He stumbled out of the alcove, looking down the corridor at the oncoming wave of students, and immediately set off in the other direction, hardly paying attention to where he was going. There was a tapestry on the wall that covered an archway which Severus had occasionally used to get between here and the dungeons, and he ducked beneath it and broke into a run. But as he neared the hidden staircase down to the Slytherin dormitory he decided he didn't want to go down there, not now, and veered off to the left instead, further down the passage. He turned left again, then right, then he lost track. Eventually he slowed to a jog, then a walk, and leaned against a wall, sliding down to the floor in a dark and deserted corridor and putting his head in his hands. His palms came away from his face wet.

"Are you lost, pet?" A woman's deep voice said, and Severus jerked his head around, looking for its source.

"Up here." Severus looked up and into a painting in a large wooden frame, depicting an exceptionally beautiful woman with dark hair and pale skin. She was sitting on a throne made of some kind of rough stone and holding what appeared to be a piglet in her lap. Severus stared.

"How did you get way back here?" she asked him, raising an eyebrow. "This corridor is separated from the rest of the castle by an almost labyrinthine series of passages. I haven't been visited by a student in longer than I care to recall."

"I am lost, yes." Severus said, rubbing at his eyes with his sleeves.

"And crying, too." The woman clucked. "Poor pet." Severus felt a little frisson of annoyance at these words, but swallowed down the snapped retort he felt rising. He was lost after all, and this woman was probably his only way of getting back to the main castle.

When she didn't speak but instead continued to look at him, Severus frowned. "Would you tell me, please, which way to go to get back to the charms corridor?"

She shook her head. "I cannot. There are no other paintings along the hallways here specifically to keep me isolated from the rest of the school. I have even less idea of where you are in relation to other rooms than you do." The piglet in her lap snuffled and turned over in its sleep. She tapped it lightly on the head and it woke with a start, scrambling off her lap and around the chair out of sight.

"There aren't any other paintings? You are kept here alone?"

"Well, not entirely. I can visit my other portrait outside the castle. It's in a lovely little shop, has been there for years. Nobody seems to want to buy it."

Severus frowned. "Who are you?"

The woman raised a haughty eyebrow, and for a moment bore more than a passing resemblance to Bellatrix Black. "Circe."

Severus glanced behind her at where the piglet had scampered away. "I see." Something was dancing on the edge of his consciousness, something about transmutation and historical magic. But there were more important things happening right now, such as his mother's death and the impending arrival of Lucius Malfoy, and his more immediate problem of being lost in a part of the

castle that had no other portraits to take him back to an area he recognized.

“Why are you kept here alone?”

“Why would you think, if you were to take a guess?” Circe’s lips curved into a wicked grin, and Severus felt himself flush.

“I really would not know.” He muttered, looking away.

“Very well, I’ll tell you then.” She stood up and leaned forward in her portrait, inclining her face towards him. “Do you know where I get my little piglets?” she murmured, snapping her fingers for the animal to come to her around the edges of the frame.

Severus swallowed and glanced at the wand she was pulling out of her mass of hair. “No.”

She gave him another of her grins, her teeth glinting in the light from her wand. “From little lost boys.” She raised her wand, and Snape pulled out his, but he couldn’t think what to do. He had never heard of a portrait that could interact with the physical world and did not know any spells for defending himself in such a case, could not think of anything to do except set fire to her canvas-

A jet of light shot over his shoulder and hit Circe’s painting. The material rippled and went dark, as though a great shadow had fallen over its contents. Severus spun around to find Potter standing at the end of the corridor, holding a rather large bit of parchment and his wand aloft.

“You!” Severus snarled, making to raise his own, but Potter quickly disarmed him. Severus backed against the wall, bumping Circe’s portrait’s frame with his shoulder, his breath coming very fast. He was indescribably angry that Potter had dared to take his wand, but without his wand, there was nothing he could do, and, to his horror, the tears he had been shedding earlier began to come back.

Potter stared at him for a moment, and Severus was fully expecting some comment about how he had finally earned the nickname they’d given him all those years ago, but to his surprise none came. Instead Potter conjured a handkerchief and levitate it over to him. Severus took it, too busy trying to get a grip on his emotions to pay much attention to the shock such an offering produced in him. He wiped his eyes, and Potter stepped forward to hand him his wand back.

“I’m trying to help.” He said as he passed it over.

Severus glared at him. “Why are you here?”

Potter looked rather uncomfortable, as though he had been hoping this question did not come up. “Well, I... Lily got an owl about you.”

Severus blinked. “How does that answer my question?”

Potter strode forward and Severus winced back, but Potter was merely moving to hold the parchment up in front of him. “Look.” He showed him the parchment. Severus’s eyes widened. It was not a parchment. It was a map, and every square inch of it apart from a section in the bottom right was full of red ink detailing the layout of the castle. It was also full of tiny moving dots, which... Severus squinted... were labelled with names. Potter pointed to a section off to the center left. “Here’s us.”

Severus stared down at the spot. Sure enough, in a narrow, unlabeled corridor off a series of narrow, unlabeled corridors, were two dots labelled Severus Snape and James Potter.

“Where did you get this?” Severus demanded, glancing up at Potter before leaning in to examine the map more closely.

“We made it. Me, Sirius, Peter, and Remus. That’s us.” He said, gesturing to the top of the parchment where great curling writing spelled out “The Marauders’ Map”.

Severus looked from Potter, to the map, and back again. “You are lying.”

“No, I’m not. We’ve been mapping out the castle since the beginning of fifth year.”

“But how did you get this spell to work? Even if you were able to measure and assign a value to every single magical signature that was in the castle at the moment you added the dots, every year new students arrive and old students leave. You would have to derive some sort of arithmantic formula to-“

“-automatically run sweeps for new magical signatures and assign them values, yeah. It’s not as hard as all that. Names work in place of values. It’s a pretty well known trait of magic that the name of a thing is central to its power.”

Severus, thinking of his long history of inventing spells, nodded in agreement. “Nevertheless, this is incredible. I would not have expected...”

“Yeah yeah, you can be impressed with our magical prowess later, right now we should head out of here. That spell I cast on the portrait isn’t going to hold forever.”

“What did you do to her?” Severus asked, glancing back at Circe’s frame as Potter started off down the hallway.

“Just a simple light absorbing spell, that one you use to make plants grow. The color black is just the absorbing of all colors of light at once, or so Lily tells me. I figured it’d cause the portrait to go temporarily black, and it did.”

Severus was impressed against his will for the second time in as many minutes, and scowled as he hurried after Potter.

“So, the reason I came to get you. Lily got an owl from her mum this morning. Apparently your dad went round to their home and demanded she send one to you for him. Your family’s owl is gone and he didn’t know how to get in contact with you.”

Severus’s stomach clenched. The owl had been his mother’s and Tobias had never liked it. The bird had probably abandoned the house the moment his mother had...

“You okay, Snape?” Potter asked, turning around and staring at him as he stopped walking and bent over, his hands on his knees, forcing himself to breathe normally.

“I am perfectly fine!” he snapped. “I don’t need your help.”

“Okay, fine. It’s just, Lily sent me to find you with the map when you didn’t show up, she figured you might be a little distraught.”

Severus glared at Potter. “What else did my father say to Mrs Evans?”

“Potter looked sideways at him, almost apologetic. “He said your mother is dead. I hope I’m not the one to deliver that news.”

Severus forced himself to sneer even as his breath hitched. "You are not, I received a letter this morning to the same effect."

"Hence distraught." Potter said.

"Cease speaking." Severus snapped. Potter wisely shut up after that.

The rest of the morning was a haze for Severus. He had two classes and lunch and remembered none of it. Before the meal he went down to his dormitory where he packed a bag of clothes and his potions text book, and, after a moment's deliberation, the brooch his mother had given him the year he went off to Hogwarts. "The Prince family crest", she had told him.

Slinging the bag over his shoulder, he went up to eat.

Lily and Potter both wandered over to where he was sitting alone at the Slytherin table, both flustered and apologetic, both evidently feeling they needed to help him in some way. It merely increased the feeling he had been carrying around since he'd read Abraxas Malfoy's letter, a feeling of unreality. He sent them back to their table with an empty word of thanks, staring after them as they went. After a few more minutes of forcing himself to eat whatever it was that he had put onto his plate, he stood up and walked out into the entrance hall, staring around for Lucius. A few moments later Professor McGonagall joined him by the front doors.

"Mister Snape. I will escort you to the castle gates, where Mister Malfoy is waiting to take you to his father's home. Professor Slughorn sends his condolences and begs your forgiveness for not accompanying you himself." She said this last in a very chilly tone, and Severus, far from feeling defensive on behalf of the old potions master, felt an unexpected warmth towards the Gryffindor head of house.

"He has never liked me much."

"Quite." McGonagall said, after a moment. "Well, come along, Mister Snape."

They did not speak further as they walked, but McGonagall did cast a warming charm over him several times and expressed her sorrow for his loss as she left him with Lucius.

James watched Snape head out of the hall, an odd feeling in his stomach. Sirius elbowed him. "Stop worrying. You can't mother hen Snivellus, you hate each other."

"Yeah." James said, turning back to his pudding. He caught Lily's eye a few seats up and they exchanged a brief commiserating look. James knew he was imagining it, but he thought he could feel a weight on his left forearm.

Severus remained in a kind of daze throughout the next several hours. Lucius lent him some formal robes which had to be shrunk down a little to fit him but which, according to Lucius anyway, suited him well. Together they walked down to Abraxas Malfoy's drawing room where a long, sleek black coffin was laid out and two dozen people Severus had never seen before were standing around, talking to each other, and eating small blocks of cheese and some kind of seafood off floating silver trays. Severus stopped walking, and Lucius took him by the arm and led him, with a pat on the back of his hand, over to his father.

“Mister Snape.” Abraxas said, clasping Severus’s hand in both of his. “I am so sorry for your dreadful loss.”

Severus nodded, and then, pulling his mind together for the first time since opening Abraxas’s letter that morning, cleared his throat. “Thank you sir. It was a great shock to me to receive your letter.”

“Naturally. I am sure if your mother had been in poor health she would have written to you.” Abraxas said, peering into Severus’s face.

“Of course. But it was also that I had never heard your name from my mother before. I had no idea you were the trustee to her estate.”

Abraxas’s eyes crinkled as he smiled. “Ah, I see. No matter, no matter. You were not aware, Mister Snape, that in the event of the death of a witch or wizard who is not married to the bearer of their mark, their estate passes to that person?”

Severus stared at him, at a complete loss for words. There had to have been some mistake.

After several seconds, Lucius cleared his throat and nudged Severus subtly in the arm. Severus closed his eyes momentarily and opened them again, half hoping the world would have disappeared in the intervening time. His surroundings remained stubbornly in place.

“I beg your pardon?” Severus said after several more seconds, because there didn’t seem to be anything else to say.

Abraxas Malfoy rolled up the left sleeve of his robe to reveal the name “Eileen Prince” there on his skin. Severus stared at it.

“Were you not aware that your mother and my father were matched?” Lucius murmured, looking down at Severus with an expression both amused and pitying.

“No.” Severus said, unable to tear his eyes away from Abraxas’s arm even after he’d rolled down his sleeve again. “No, my mother’s left arm has been covered in scars for as long as I can remember. I assumed- Tobias-“

“Ah yes, the muggle.” Abraxas sneered, straightening up to his full height. “I daresay she regretted running away with him, near the end.”

“Running away? Eileen didn’t have-“

“Oh, Eileen and I were well matched. She had my name. I never knew what she saw in him, none of her family or friends did. I certainly don’t wish to speak ill of the dead or of your mother, Mister Snape, but I daresay that her decision to throw away a respectable pureblood match for some mudblood was why the Princes disinherited her.”

Snape stared at him, then at Lucius Malfoy, and then at the coffin where his mother’s body lay. “Excuse me.” He said. “I think I would like to pay my respects to my mother alone.”

“Perfectly understandable. Please join me in the library when you are finished, there’s the matter of the estate to discuss.”

Severus nodded and went to stand by the coffin as Abraxas and Lucius began ushering people out of the room and onto the lawn.

Severus stared down at Eileen Snape, at her prematurely lined face and the thin lips he had inherited. He reached out to move her left arm with the intent of turning it over so he could look at the scarring there, and found at the last moment he could not stand to touch her cold skin.

His mother was gone. But, if Severus was honest with himself, his mother had been gone for a long time. She had started to go when he began showing signs of magic, when Tobias had begun drinking, when she had stopped caring for herself. It had been a lifetime ago that she had taught him how to peel potatoes and held him in her lap while she read him a history of the *fortis animi* spell on the floor of their dusty old attic. She hadn't been the same person for a very long time, and Severus, standing at the edge of her coffin, his knuckles white against the ebony wood he was holding himself upright on, let the tears roll down his face for all he had lost in the years between then and now.

Chapter 5

The next day Abraxas, Lucius, and Severus Apparated to Spinner's End. Severus was relieved that Tobias didn't seem to be around- in all likelihood he was at the pub down the street- and with little encouragement from the Malfoys determined to have the business of sorting through Eileen's possessions done as quickly as possible.

"In cases where a witch or wizard is married to a muggle and the witch or wizard dies, the ministry prefers for any magical artifacts to be removed from the house by a family member or friend. To maintain the Statute of Secrecy, you know." Lucius told Severus in a hushed voice while Abraxas looked around the grimy sitting room with disdain.

It took them less than an hour to search the house. A quick spell told Abraxas that the only magical objects were the items in his own room and in the attic- the books he had been reading since childhood. After packing them back into boxes, Abraxas banished them back to his own house with a wave of his wand.

"They will of course be available to you when you come of age next month, but until then it is the correct legal course of action to keep them out of the hands of your father." Abraxas told him. Severus nodded.

"Shall we go, then, or do you want to speak to Tobias?" Lucius asked with such a subtle sneer that Severus was sure any non-Slytherin would have missed it.

"I suppose I should, just to be sure he's not so drunk that he burns the house down."

"I don't see that it would be any great loss." Lucius said, eyes flicking around the sitting room just as Abraxas's had done. Severus privately agreed. "I will return to side-along you back to the manor this evening, yes? Shall we say around eight?"

"Alright." Abraxas stopped surveying everything and nodded once to Severus before disappearing with a pop. Lucius clapped a hand on his shoulder before doing the same.

Severus glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, one of the few pieces of decoration that had ever been in the house and the only one that had not been sold in the years since the mill closed. It was just after four. He stared around again, unsure of what to do with himself while waiting for Tobias, before giving up and heading into the kitchen. If he was going to be stuck here until his father returned from drinking he might as well be doing something useful.

Severus was setting out dishes when Tobias staggered into the house several hours later. He dropped into his usual place at the table and rubbed a hand across his face. When Severus set down a dish of potatoes Tobias stared at him like he'd never seen him before.

"What're you doing here, boy?" he grumbled.

Severus hesitated, sitting down and avoiding Tobias's eyes. "I came to get Mum's books from the attic, and to talk to you."

Tobias grunted. "Made funeral arrangements yet? God knows I can't afford it."

A frown twitched across Severus's lips and he barely restrained himself from snapping that maybe Tobias would have the money to pay to bury Eileen if he didn't spend all of it on drink. It hardly mattered. The deed was done already.

"As a matter of fact, yes. She was buried yesterday."

Tobias jerked his head up from his plateful of colcannon. "Already buried? Who did it? I thought she was still in the morgue down in—"

"An old friend of hers, apparently."

"Bullshit. Eileen didn't have any friends."

"Not your friends."

"Ah." Tobias resumed eating. "Her sort of folk?"

"Yes. Did you ever hear Eileen mention Malfoy? Abraxas Malfoy?" Severus was careful to keep his tone neutral. If Tobias knew how much Severus wanted this information he would be a lot less forthcoming. He wasn't likely to be forthcoming at any rate, but all the same—

"That ponce she was supposed to marry?" Tobias said offhandedly, completely shocking Severus. "Yeah. Met 'im once, a long time ago. He paid for the funeral, eh? Never got over her? Well I just wish he'd've shown up and taken her off my hands while she was still alive." He snorted and took a drink of his beer.

Severus stared at him. "When did you meet him?"

"Gatecrashed the wedding. Told me a whole bunch of nonsense about soulmates and how I'd be sorry I ever took her away from him."

Severus forced himself to appear unconcerned. "What was his stake in it?"

Tobias scratched his chin, thinking. "She told me that he wanted her family's money. They disowned her when we ran off together. Never met her parents but she cried for days after it happened. Bleedin' arsholes." He swallowed his mouthful of potato and stared at the wall a few feet left of Severus. "Used to wonder why she chose me."

"She never told you?"

"She was very headstrong when she was younger, Eileen. S'pose she objected to the idea of arranged marriage on principle."

Severus hesitated. He was loathe to bring up anything to do with magic directly in his father's presence but so far they'd avoided the topic of the mark and Severus desperately needed to know. "Did she ever show you a mark on her arm? A name?"

Tobias's expression, predictably, grew stormy. "That nonsense about a soulmate spell? Yeah, she mentioned it once. Took a knife to her arm when you were about three. Guess she was tired of looking at Malfoy's name there. Regretted not taking her best option."

Severus inhaled sharply. "So it was Abraxas Malfoy's name on her arm?"

"Course it was. She'd have been better off with her own kind, with those unnatural people you

idolize so much, but she turned her back on it and spent her life regretting it. God knows I regret it." Tobias took another drink and smirked at Severus. "If she'd married that rich bloke we'd have never met and I'd've never ended up havin' to deal with her moods and her illness. *You* wouldn't be here, that's for damn sure."

Severus felt heat rising to his face. His mother had been sick his whole life and it was in large part because of the way Tobias treated her.

"Maybe you're right." He grit out. "Maybe Abraxas Malfoy would have treated her well instead of beating her and starving her so he could drink himself into a stupor every night for the last ten years."

Tobias pushed his chair back and stood up. "You watch your mouth, boy, or I'll slap that attitude right."

Severus pulled his wand from his pocket and rose from his chair as well. "You will slap me like you always have, and I will hex you, and it'll still be your fault she's dead." Severus said, his voice deadly quiet.

Tobias threw back his head and laughed. "You think it's my fault she's dead? Mine? You're the one who killed her, you and those abominations you call friends. Demons like her shouldn't mix with normal people. She should have stayed where she belonged. Bad enough she tricked me and brought her filth into my life, but trying to salvage the situation after giving me a little monster like you was too much. Good riddance to her."

Is the weapon and the tremor,

The glasses on the table exploded, along with the bare lightbulb in the ceiling. It covered the table and the remains of the meal, as well as Severus and his father. Severus stepped toward Tobias with his wand raised, but at the last moment changed his mind and grabbed a knife off the table.

"What happened to Eileen What did you do to her?" Severus ground out, pressing the blade of the knife to Tobias's throat. Tobias laughed again, and Severus watches a few drops of blood roll down his neck.

"I came home the other night to find her dead in our bed. I don't know how she died, I just called the coroner and went to your little redhead friend's house to ask them to send you a message."

"Tell the truth." Severus whispered, his voice wavering in anger. He stared into Tobias's eyes, pushing to see behind them yet terrified of what he'd find when he broke through.

The clock on the mantle struck eight.

Severus dropped the knife and backed away. "I am leaving, and if I come back it will be to kill you." His voice was still quiet, raspy, and trembling.

Tobias rubbed at his throat for a moment, then spat onto the table. "Good riddance to you as well. You've always been trash and you always will, boy. No bloody *magic* can change that."

Severus strode from the room and out the front door, where Lucius apparated a moment later.

"Severus, good gracious, you're covered in blood. Is that *glass*?"

"We can talk later. I want to leave." Severus said coolly. Lucius stared for a fraction of a second, then nodded and extended his arm. They disappeared into the night.

the cause and the effect.

Severus spent that night with the Malfoys before Lucius apparated him back to the gates of Hogwarts the next morning. He expressed displeasure that Severus couldn't stay with them for Christmas, but Abraxas had suggested that it might be best if Severus spent the holiday with his father so that they could say goodbye to his mother together. Severus hadn't told them about the fight he'd had with Tobias nor that he didn't plan to ever return to Spinner's End. He was still angry enough to want to kill Tobias, but it seemed inadvisable to do so until he was at least free of the Trace and magically able to cover his tracks. He resolved to spend the last week of term and then holiday doing some more research instead. His run-in with Potter several days previously and thinking about the Trace had given him some new ideas, and he was desperate to switch back into research mode and stop thinking about his mother and Abraxas Malfoy.

When wizarding parents had children, they filed a birth certificate with the Ministry. Severus had seen his and Eileen's in a small box in the attic when he was a child. He'd assumed at the time that the ministry having a record of magical births was how Hogwarts knew who to send acceptance letters to and who to put the Trace on, but that didn't explain how muggleborns got accepted. Upon looking into the structure and functions of the ministry under the guise of asking Slughorn for career advice (as if Slughorn would seriously recommend him for a job at the ministry), he made the discovery that there was a branch of research carried on there on the nature and magical properties of love. This discovery was simultaneously exhilarating and immensely frustrating, because Severus was certain that knowing more about the research conducted there would help with his own, but it was all kept very secret and there was absolutely no chance he would get access to it. With great reluctance he moved on to other avenues of study.

After far too many evenings looking through the magical law section of the library, Severus was able to piece together how the Trace must work- or rather, how it did *not* work. It was not intentionally placed on a person at their birth, or, as far as Severus could tell, at all. It did not have to be manually removed when a wizard came of age, but instead was lifted automatically. There was a list of names kept in the Improper Use of Magic Office for the purpose of detecting underage magic, but there had been several legal cases that hinged on the fact that it actually detected magic used in proximity to a person on the list, and not magic that was cast by a person on the list. This indicated that the nature of magic was not such that it was possible to determine who someone was by their magic, a theory which Severus thought was supported by the fact that the list of underage witches and wizards kept in the Improper Use of Magic Office had been developed in conjunction with the Department of Mysteries. He seemed to have circled back around to the idea that the *fortis animi* did have something to do with souls, or at least relied on something other than magic alone to match people up. He was starting to suspect, too, that he was going to need to take a closer look at Potter's map if he was going to make any headway.

With this information Severus stopped his research for a while.

It wasn't until the last night of term that Severus finally grit his teeth and approached Potter to ask

about the map. He followed him and his little gang out of the Great Hall after dinner, hands in his pockets gripping his wand in case Black or Lupin tried anything.

“Potter.” He called from a distance. Potter turned with such a surprised look on his face Severus was tempted to laugh. Black, Lupin, and Pettigrew, however, had drawn their wands and all looked some combination of annoyed and suspicious.

“May I speak with you alone?” Severus asked, determinedly ignoring looking at any of the others or their drawn wands.

“I... yeah, alright.” Potter said, making a shooing gesture at the others. Pettigrew and Lupin put their wands away while Black continued to jeer. Lupin gently pushed his arm down and pulled him away up the stairs. Severus waited until they’d disappeared from sight before approaching Potter.

“Looking forward to Christmas, Snape?” Potter said in a tone of forced lightness. Severus raised an eyebrow.

“Skip the pleasantries, Potter. I want to borrow your map over the holiday.”

Potter blinked at him.

“Surely you won’t need it, over Christmas. You’ll be home with your family. I can offer you collateral if you’re worried about its safety in my hands.”

Potter shook his head, smiling. “Actually I’ll be here, my parents are taking a trip for their anniversary this Christmas.”

Severus was rather taken aback by this information. He’d hoped to have the castle more or less to himself; nearly everyone went home for Christmas. Even Lupin was probably going home, since the full moon did not fall over the holiday. Severus would normally have done so as well, to see his mother... but that was no longer an option.

Before he could say anything, Potter was speaking again. “If this is about the *fortis animi* I’d like to work with you on whatever it is you’re doing.”

Severus frowned.

“Look, I know we don’t like each other and I know you’ve got good reason. I’ve been horrible to you. I don’t know how much good it’ll do to say it, but I am sorry for what happened last summer.” Potter looked intensely uncomfortable. “You didn’t deserve that.”

“And I did deserve everything that happened before?”

Potter rolled his eyes. “Of course not. But last summer was the biggest thing.”

That was certainly true. Severus didn’t really want to work with Potter, and he certainly didn’t trust this olive branch, but he did need the map and if it was the case that Potter and Severus would be separated from their respective housemates for the holidays, it might be possible to get through working together.

“Will the rest of your band of troublemakers be staying over break?” Severus asked.

Potter laughed. “No, Peter’s going home, Sirius is staying with Remus at the Lupin’s. Lily’s going home as well although I’m not sure she really wants to, apparently her sister’s been sending her some really nasty letters since your mum-“ Potter abruptly cut himself off.

"Ah. Has my father been harassing their family?" Severus asked, keeping his voice even.

"That's the impression I got, yeah." Potter grimaced sympathetically. "I don't think she blames you."

Severus shook his head. "Alright. I suppose we can work together. I need your map and your knowledge about how you made it."

Potter was frozen for a moment before starting to beam. "Really? Great! When should we start?"

"I would prefer to start tomorrow but no doubt you want to see your friends off."

"Yeah, I do, actually. The next day would be better."

"Friday it is then. Meet me in the library after breakfast and bring your map."

"Okay, I can do that." Potter bounced on the balls of his feet for a moment before sticking out his hand for Severus to shake. Severus stared at it, and, after a moment's deliberation during which he wished for the second time in a week that he could perform legilimency extremely well, to determine Potter's true stake in all this, took his hand.

"I still don't trust you." he said.

"That's alright." Potter responded.

*Once the arrow leaves the bow-
will-of-its-own-will-of-its-own-
there is no turning back.*

James felt strangely elated as he climbed through the portrait hole into the Common Room. There was an end-of-term party going on, instigated by Sirius in all likelihood, but James wasn't sure he really wanted to join in. He wasn't sure what exactly he wanted in this moment but, as Lily was sitting in the corner with a butterbeer, he settled for going to join her.

"Hey Lily."

"James." She said, taking a swig of her drink. "What did Snape want from you, then?"

"Did Sirius tell you he came to talk to me?"

"Remus, actually." She smiled. "He seems in good spirits."

James laughed. "Yeah, he's taking Sirius home for the holiday."

Lily made a soft cooing sort of sound. "That's sweet."

"Who'd have believed, this time last year, that they'd have gotten their act together?"

"I certainly wouldn't have." Lily said with a chuckle. She reached down to the floor and handed James a plate of desserts. "Here, have some scones or something. I took too many."

James helped himself to a jam tart. "Thanks."

“So... what did Snape want then?”

“To uh, borrow the Marauders Map, actually. He thinks it might be helpful with his research on the *fortis animi* spell.”

“I’m surprised he’s still working on that, it’s been nearly a year.” She said rather coolly.

James looked at her.

“What?”

“It’s just that for somebody who’d been his friend for so long, I’d have thought that you’d both understand him better and be a little more sympathetic towards him.” James blinked and stared around at the group of people by the fire. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

“The tables have turned, eh?” Lily said with a smirk in her voice. “Go on, then. Tell me off for not being a good friend or whatever.”

“It’s just... he lost his mum last week. You know this, you’ve been getting those letters from Petunia about his dad. They obviously don’t get on, and that means he has nobody now but the other Slytherins.”

“I know.” Lily said. She sounded somewhat defensive. “He sent me a whole bunch of letters over the summer trying to make up over that whole incident after the DADA O.W.L.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Lily sighed. “The other Slytherins. Do you remember Lucius Malfoy?”

James shrugged. “The blonde one who graduated a couple years ago?”

“Yeah, him. Do you know what he’s doing now? Frank says his people, whoever they are, have been hearing some rumors. Apparently there’s some pretty strong evidence that Lucius has been working for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. For that group of his. And you know who really looked up to him and who he’s been keeping in contact with? Avery and Mulciber.”

James frowned. “The Slytherins Snape hangs around with?”

“Yes! And I know for a fact that he stayed with the Malfoys for his mother’s funeral, they paid for it. Severus was always saying to me that he had to take advantage of his connections in Slytherin if he was going to go places, but if the places he’s going are with those people, then I don’t want any more to do with him.” She folded her arms over her chest.

James considered this information. It seemed very unlikely to him that Snape would join the Death Eaters, although he couldn’t put his finger on why exactly. He did know that Snape’s continued focus on the soulmate spell was evidence of a prolonged need for a distraction.

“I don’t think you’re doing Snape any favors by allowing him to isolate himself.” James said after a while. Lily snorted.

“Snape’s been isolating himself for as long as I’ve known him.”

“But have Death Eaters been trying to recruit him for as long as you’ve known him?” James said quietly. Lily’s expression darkened.

“Why should it be up to me to stop him from doing what he likes? If he wants to throw his lot in

with them, why should I be responsible for that?"

"I didn't say you were, Lily. I just think you're jumping to conclusions about his motivations and that it's not like you to be so quick to dismiss people like you've been dismissing him since last summer."

Lily turned to face him. "He hates you, James. And Sirius, and Remus, and Peter, and the rest of the Gryffindors. For a while I thought I was the exception, but clearly not. He sent me plenty of letters over the summer when he was stuck at home with his father, but hasn't tried to talk to me once since the term started. He has all these little meetings with the other Slytherins under the pretense of tutoring them, he's taken every opportunity to hex you and the rest of the Marauders, and I don't care about the circumstances the fact remains that he spent a couple days with the Malfoys. With *Lucius Malfoy*, who is almost certainly recruiting Slytherin students to be Death Eaters." Lily watched him seriously. "So I'm sorry, but I can't give him the benefit of the doubt in this scenario, even if we did used to be close. I'm surprised you're doing so."

James shrugged. "I've just got a feeling."

Lily stood up and stretched. "Well, you just make sure your feeling doesn't end up getting yourself hurt." She shook her head. "I'm going to bed. You coming down to Hogsmeade Station to see everybody off tomorrow?"

"Yeah, wouldn't miss it. Good night, Lily."

"night, James."

James sat up for a long time after that, not really joining in the party, just looking around at everybody, absentmindedly rubbing his forearm.

Severus already had his books spread out around him at a table in the library when Potter arrived. He sank into a seat next to Severus and pulled a bit of blank parchment out of his pocket and set it in front of Severus.

Severus looked from it to Potter with a raised eyebrow. Potter cleared his throat and took out his wand. He tapped the center of the parchment and muttered, almost too quiet for Severus to hear, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Severus bit back a snort. Trust the Gryffindors to make a complicated and fascinating piece of magic for the purpose of causing trouble.

Ink spread outward from Potter's wand tip, blossoming into the map Severus had seen down the charms corridor the previous fortnight. There were many fewer dots than there had been last time, as everybody had gone home for Christmas.

"Okay, what are we doing now?" Potter asked cheerfully. Severus ignored his tone and leaned closer to inspect the map.

"The house elves remain at Hogwarts even during the Christmas holiday. If you set this map up to detect people based purely on magical signatures, they should appear." He found the kitchens and pursed his lips. "As I suspected, they do not."

"No, house elves have a different kind of magic than humans. And goblins have another kind, and centaurs, and ghosts, et cetera."

"I do not believe that to be the case." Severus said.

"What? Of course they do. House elves can apparate in and out of Hogwarts while humans can't, they must have a different kind of magic."

"I believe there must be a difference between magic and... essence, I suppose. Soul, if you must. The magic of a witch or wizard cannot be the same thing as their soul, because if that were the case, there would be an identifiable way in which all magic was unique to and traceable from the person who conjured it. My research does not indicate that to be true."

"I don't know what you've been reading but there's definitely ways in which magic is unique to individuals. Haven't you ever cast a patronus?"

Severus bristled. "No, I have not. I know that Patronus Charm is part of the N.E.W.T curriculum for seventh year but seeing as I've been rather busy with this year's concerns, I have not had cause to look very closely into it."

Potter put his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply you were researching badly or something. I'm sure you've been doing what makes the most sense to you and I'm not saying you're wrong that magic and souls are different. I'm just saying that I don't think it's correct to say that there's no cases in which magic is unique to individuals. The Patronus Charm manifests itself differently for everybody."

Severus nodded. "Alright, that's a start. Can you think of any other spells which produce effects unique to individuals?"

"Being an Animagus follows the same principle. Professor McGonagall is a cat Animagus and her patronus is also a cat."

"I see. But when others cast the same spell it produces different versions of the same result."

"Yeah, basically."

"Alright. If magic-"

They sat in the library all day, Severus pulling out books and Potter mostly relaying information he remembered. This happened the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. On the morning of Christmas Eve, Potter entered the library dressed to go outside and all but dragged Severus down to the dungeons to put on a heavy cloak, scarf, and gloves. He led him outside and through the snow to the edge of the forest, where they met the gamekeeper Hagrid and his massive dog. Hagrid invited them both in for tea, and Severus found himself listening to Potter chatter away with the half-giant with a feeling of contentment. This was promptly shattered when Potter dragged him back outside and insisted that they throw snowballs at each other, but Severus found he rather enjoyed watching Potter wipe snow off his face and from behind his glasses.

They returned to the castle soaked and freezing, and Severus headed into the Great Hall to sit in front of the fire rather than going back down to the dungeons. It was far too cold and damp there in the winter even when one was dry.

He cast a heating spell on himself and settled down in front of the fire, oddly comfortable and happy with the events of the day. It had been surreal to spend time with Potter and enjoy himself, but if he was being honest he'd been enjoying spending time with Potter since the first day of break. He'd misjudged the Gryffindor's intellect, he had to admit that now. Potter's knowledge may be unsystematic, vague in places, and coming entirely from his memory with no specific

source or reference, but it was invariably correct. It was also clear that Potter's knowledge wasn't just the result of osmosis from growing up in a pureblood family- he had a genuine interest in knowing things and enjoyed learning. Severus found himself thinking with a twinge of regret that they could have been friends if Severus had known this years ago.

But no, they couldn't have. It had been Potter who had started it, on the train. Potter and Black had criticized Slytherin house and lumped Severus in with everything bad the house had produced. Severus had been angry- Slytherin was his mother's house and the house he'd been looking forward to entering since he was a child. They'd continued to bully him, for his clothes, for his looks, for his friendship with Lily, and Severus had grown to hate them. They could never have been friends because it was only because of the *fortis animi* that Potter had been forced to look past Severus's house and appearance to find some common ground.

Severus suddenly felt cold all over again. He moved closer to the fire, but it did little to warm him.

James rubbed his face and sighed. He'd been in the library with Snape nearly every day of break and they didn't seem to be any closer to a concrete, practical solution. James had enjoyed talking about theoretical magic with the Slytherin a lot more than he'd anticipated, but he was starting to get antsy. The sun was out and the weather was warmer than it had been in days. He stared out one of the mullioned windows at the quidditch pitch, thinking longingly of flying.

"-It always seems to come back to this divide between magic and essence. There must be a way in which essence channels magic but does not create it, because otherwise muggles and squibs would not be affected by the spell." Snape said, looking at James expectantly. James refocused his attention reluctantly.

"I dunno, Snape. We've been working for hours and I feel like we're going in circles."

Snape visibly bristled, narrowing his eyes. "You were the one who *wanted* to work together. This was always your idea." He shook his head. "Tell me again: how did you get the map to recognize names?"

James sighed again. "We used Avicenna's Second Formula to enhance a localized *hominem revelio*. Then we built an Iamblichan Net around it." James rolled his shoulders and glanced out the window again. "The Net is what labels the dots on the map. *Hominem revelio* detects the presence of people, but without the Net you have no way of knowing who's who."

Snape nodded impatiently. "Yes, but why is this so? *Hominem revelio* only detects people, not house elves or animals, and it does detect Filch so it is not reliant on a magical signature but rather on the essence of a person. What exactly does the Net do and why does the *hominem revelio* not do the same?"

James shrugged. "Look, I don't know why ancient and complicated arithmancy works, I just trust that it does. Maybe you should find a book on Iamblichus. I, however, am going out to fly." He stood up and clapped Snape on the shoulder. Snape glared up at him from behind his curtain of hair.

"Yes, because flying is so much more interesting and important than figuring out an old complex bit of magic that has inextricably bound us."

James yawned and stretched. "Honestly, I'm over it. So we're marked for each other. I think at a certain point you just have to accept things and move on with your life."

To James's surprise and dismay, Snape jerked his head up from his books, a snarl on his face. "And you think that is an option for me as easily as it is for you?"

"Well... why not?"

Snape looked disgusted. "Go and fly, then. Leave me in peace."

Something clenched in James's chest, and he reached out to lay a hand on Snape's shoulder. Snape jerked away.

"I said leave me." He bent back over his notes, scribbling furiously. James stared down at him for a moment, trying to think of something to say, but after a few moments realized he had no idea what the right thing might be, and headed out of the library to Gryffindor tower, ready to pick up his broom and get outside. The weight of Snape's reaction pressed on him all the way down to the quidditch pitch.

Severus closed his eyes and waited for the sounds of Potter's footsteps to fade before standing up. Truth be told, he was equally tired of working, but not nearly as tired as he was of the barrage of uncomfortable emotions working on friendly terms with Potter was giving him.

Severus hadn't expected Potter to be as intelligent as he was revealing himself to be, of course, but he also found himself surprised by the Gryffindor's sense of humor, patience, courtesy, and agreeableness. He was quite witty but never at Severus's expense, he was happy to sit and talk without testing out spells for days at a time, and he could more than keep up with Severus. He had made some incredible intuitive leaps of his own, and Severus was certain that he would not have gotten as far as he was currently without Potter's feedback and ideas. Severus doubted whether he would have done as much if their roles were reversed.

It was infuriating, that's what it was. James Potter had spent years tormenting him, making his life at school miserable, slowly robbing him of all that he had looked forward to about the wizarding world, and he had the gall to be decent *now*? Now, after years? After the werewolf incident and the attack by the lake, after stealing his only friend and leaving him at the mercy of his aristocratic, sneering housemates, after the mark, after making him wish, desperately and just for a moment, that he had been sorted into Gryffindor with Lily?

Severus strode around the room, not really looking at anything. He wanted to destroy something. Maybe he wanted to destroy himself, he wasn't really sure. After a bit Severus stopped pacing and leaned his forehead against a window, staring off into the forest, snow falling in clumps from the branches. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, letting the cold from the pane seep into his skin.

There was a knock on the glass. Severus opened his eyes to find James Potter grinning at him, gesturing for him to open the window. With far less reluctance than he would have expected, Severus undid the latch.

"See, you were tired of working, too. Come down to the quidditch pitch and fly with me."

Severus bit his lip against the sudden rush of cold air. "I haven't got a broom."

"Madam Hooch keeps some loaner brooms in the changing rooms. Won't be very fast but they'll get the job done." Potter beamed at him. "Come on, Severus."

Severus blinked at him for several seconds. Potter's smile didn't waver. "I- alright."

Potter nodded enthusiastically. "Excellent."

They didn't really make any further progress on the spell for the rest of break, but Severus was finding it increasingly difficult to be bothered about it. Potter wasn't that bad. He still incited a maelstrom of warring emotions in Severus, but between exploring the castle using Potter's map and taking turns flying around the quidditch pitch on Potter's broom, Severus was having an unexpectedly good time not worrying about whether he still wanted to reverse the spell or not.

He expected Potter to go back to his old routine of ignoring Severus or making rude comments about him with Black as they passed when the rest of the school returned, but, to Severus's confusion, he did not. They did speak less because they had their own classes and schoolwork to be getting on with, but they still met up a couple evenings a week to sit in the library and go through whatever new sources Severus had managed to find.

"How is Lily?" Severus asked one evening.

"What?" Potter said blankly, looking up from his book.

"It seemed to me that the two of you have been spending an awful lot of time together since the beginning of the schoolyear." Severus said, his voice carefully measured.

"Oh! Yeah, I guess we have been. She's great. We might go to Hogsmeade together next weekend."

Severus felt an odd twinge at this rearranged his features into a carefully neutral expression. Potter appeared to have noticed, however.

"Severus... were the two of you..." he stopped and blushed.

"Were we what?" Severus said waspishly.

"Were you two a couple?"

Severus stared at him. "Why would you ask that?"

Potter began shuffling his papers around under the (pitifully transparent) guise of looking for something. "She seems disproportionately angry that you haven't tried again to reconnect with her. It's the kind of thing that would make sense if you'd been together."

Severus continued to stare, a thousand little interactions with Lily coming back to him. Of course. Of course. So much of her attitude since fourth year suddenly made a great deal more sense. Severus put his face in his hands. He could feel himself turning red.

"Severus? What's up?"

"I think... she may have been interested in me. Romantically." His voice came out very muffled.

Potter laughed nervously. "Wait. So the two of you *weren't* ever together?"

Severus looked up. "Merlin, no. She was my best friend, but I never even considered... I do not think of her that way."

Potter looked relieved. "Then you don't mind me taking her out?"

"No." Severus said, even while some part of him irrationally, bewilderingly, screamed *yes*.

"I reckon she misses you."

Severus shrugged. "You would be in a better position to judge than I. Does she... talk about me often?"

Potter grinned fondly. "She does, actually. Mostly to worry about you and your future. She did tell me something useful the other day, though."

"Oh?" Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Apparently Sunday's your birthday?"

Severus hesitated, then nodded. Potter beamed. "How about we skip research tomorrow night then, eh? I have something you might find interesting."

Severus was in a very good mood the next morning. He wasn't even really sure why, just that he was happier than he'd been in a while. Surprisingly, he even got an owl at breakfast. It was from Lucius.

Dear Severus,

Happy Birthday! I trust that this letter finds you well and in a fit state to enjoy yourself on your seventeenth.

Father has asked me to invite you for dinner tonight so the two of you can go over the transfer of your estate. If this is agreeable to you I will be at the Hogwarts gates to pick you up around seven.

*Affectionately,
Lucius Malfoy*

Severus stared down at the letter, some of his good mood evaporating. Generally if somebody sent something by owl post that required an answer on as short a time frame as "tonight" then the owl would remain to take a return message, and some line indicating such would be included in the letter. This was not so much a request as an order from the current holder of Severus's estate, and he felt a twinge in his chest that he wouldn't be able to keep his appointment with Potter. He stuffed the letter into his robes pocket and determined to talk to Potter about rearranging their meeting during their shared Transfiguration class later that morning.

However, a disruption occurred during Transfiguration that pushed the letter and Potter out of Severus's mind. Two Gryffindor girls who Severus was fairly certain were called Alice and Dorcas were bent over a newspaper and there was a large group of people gathered around them, including, Severus saw, Black, Pettigrew and Lupin.

"You think he's started moving on the ministry?"

"Nah, he doesn't have enough supporters to try and take over by force. They'll be infiltrating subtly. Slytherins leaving school getting jobs there, and stuff like that."

Somebody looked over their shoulder towards the door and for a terrifying moment he thought they were looking at him, but then realized that Avery and Mulciber had come in behind him. For a moment he relaxed, but then Black's voice rang out in their direction, "Not that anybody at the

ministry would give the likes of Snivellus a job, anyway.”

Somebody sniggered. Severus felt Avery and Mulciber step up behind him and draw their wands. There was a commotion from the knot of Gryffindors and Severus turned around to tell his idiot classmates to put their wands away before McGonagall got there, just in time to watch the Professor come in with Potter and Lily close behind her. Potter had a smear of lipstick on his chin. They both looked rather sheepish.

“Honestly, what has gotten into everybody today? The holidays ended over a week ago. To your seats, everybody.” McGonagall shooed the group of Gryffindors away and everybody moved to sit down. Severus breathed a small sigh of relief that nobody seemed to have noticed Avery and Mulciber’s behavior.

As the class ended they caught up to him as he left the classroom.

“Can you believe the nerve of some people?” Mulciber growled. Severus rolled his eyes.

“Gryffindors can’t be expected to behave sensibly without an adult around to discipline them. The whole lot of them haven’t got a single person’s worth of self-control.” Avery said haughtily.

“And taking out your wands when we were outnumbered ten to one shows sense and self-control, does it?” Severus snapped.

Avery glared at him. “We were getting ready to back you up if necessary.”

“I don’t need defending from Black’s petty insults. It is not my problem if he chooses to underestimate Slytherins.”

Avery clapped a hand on his shoulder. “That’s a good attitude there and you’re probably right. We’ll show ‘em in the end, yeah?”

Severus nodded, although privately he thought Black was probably correct. The chances of him managing to get any job worth having, in the ministry or out of it, were very slim. He was a poor halfblood who didn’t have anyone to recommend him- Slughorn certainly didn’t count him amongst his precious club of the future powerful, and if he couldn’t look to the *head of Slytherin* for guidance he certainly couldn’t expect it from any of the other professors. No, Severus Snape was alone in the world apart from the small measure of influence and recognition his academic prowess had earned him with his classmates. Black and Potter, with their money and their old family names, had every chance Severus did not.

With this thought Severus hurried on ahead of Mulciber and Avery on the way to herbology, eager to be alone for a while.

Dinner with the Malfoys was not what Severus was expecting. Lucius met him at the gates just as he’d said, wrapped in a heavy fur cloak against the biting wind that had started as the sun set, and took him back to the manor, which looked, Severus couldn’t help but think, distinctly creepy with so few lights lit. Lucius took him inside, handed their cloaks off to the house elf, and offered Severus a seat in the drawing room. He poured him some wine and then left him to see to dinner.

Severus tried not to feel ill at ease, but it was difficult. The last time he’d been in here he’d shared the room with his mother’s corpse. Now, however, he was alone, save for the crackling of the fire and the drift of snow piling up against the window. He shivered in the gloom, wishing he still had his cloak so he could pull it around himself, and immediately felt foolish. This was Lucius’s home,

after all. The older boy had been nothing but helpful and accommodating to him for as long as they'd been acquainted, offering him a place at the Slytherin table and ensuring that the older Slytherins didn't pick on him for his shabbiness and the horrible, distinctive lilt of his voice. He'd been the one who initially suggested that Severus tutor his classmates to make some money for experiment ingredients and better robes. It was extremely unlikely that he would do anything to harm Severus, and the fear Severus felt at being alone, on a dark night, in this lonely manor, in the room where he'd stood not two feet from his mother's coffin was merely residual muggle superstition.

After what felt like a very long time Lucius returned, bringing with him a full bottle of wine and two glasses on a platter floating along behind him. "Severus! You look rather uncomfortable, is the fire not warm enough? Or... ah. Perhaps we should wait for our meal in a different room?" Lucius gestured towards the door, raising an eyebrow.

Severus stood up. "That would be appreciated, actually, thank you."

"Not at all." Lucius led him out into the hallway and through a set of double doors into a massive, high-ceilinged library. With a flick of his wand he lit the chandelier and fireplace, bathing the room in warm light. Severus felt himself relaxing at last, and Lucius smirked at him as he sat down and poured himself some wine.

"Good. Now that we are both comfortable, I have something to discuss with you before we meet my father for dinner."

"Oh?" Severus replied, taking the glass of wine Lucius levitated to him.

"Yes. You will soon be leaving Hogwarts, Severus."

"Not for another year, Lucius." Severus said, raising his glass to toast his host. "I still have a year before I sit the N.E.W.T.s, or have you forgotten so quickly what Hogwarts is like?" he said with a small grin. Lucius sighed dramatically.

"No, I haven't. I've merely moved on to the bigger picture. What is it you want to do with your life, Severus?"

Severus was taken aback. He'd never seriously considered what he'd like to do if given opportunity, mostly because he'd known for several years that he did not have the luxury of partiality. He knew where his talents lay, and he knew what practical applications there were for them.

"I'd always assumed I would manufacture potions somewhere. Take a job in a shop, perhaps in Knockturn Alley, and with luck, in a few years—"

"Ah, Severus, that may what you believe you can achieve. What do you *want*? What fills you with..." Lucius swirled the wine around in his glass and took another sip, "passion?"

Severus stared into the fire, thinking. What filled him with passion? He thought of the name on his arm, and of the countless hours he'd spent in the library in the past year, and of the room in the Department of Mysteries that he would almost certainly never enter.

"You look troubled, dear friend." Lucius said quietly. "What is it that you so desire that you cannot even tell me?"

Severus glanced at Lucius, then gestured around at the towering shelves of books. "Knowledge." He said. "Magical knowledge. There is so little that wizardkind understands about ourselves, so

little we've uncovered in all the generations we've had."

Lucius considered him, staring into his eyes. Severus tried to read the expression there, to look behind the eyes and see what Lucius was getting at. There was a wall up inside his head, one that Severus did not think wise to force down.

A slow smile spread over Lucius's face. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of him. "Severus, what do you know about the Dark Lord?"

Severus returned to the castle that evening just before sixth year curfew. He lay awake in bed for a long time that evening, thinking about the future.

James Potter finally went up to bed around 11, tired of deflecting Lily's questions. Snape hadn't shown up for their meeting and after two hours of failing to find him on the map James had given it up and called it a night, leaving the seventh floor corridor with the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and returning to the common room.

Chapter 6

Snape didn't show up for their regular Saturday research session and wasn't at breakfast on Sunday, and James felt a serious disappointment. He hadn't realized how much he'd been counting on the coincidence of bumping into each other before James and Lily left for Hogsmeade and the chance to wish Snape a happy birthday until it had been snatched from him. He'd also left the map with Sirius so that he and Remus could do a bit of whatever it was they got up to together once the majority of the students had left (Lily had smacked him lightly when he phrased it like this to her, saying "you can bloody well just call it snogging since you know that's what it is"). He left the castle with a weight in his stomach which was not alleviated by hot chocolate and pack of ice mice he shared with Lily.

When Severus woke up on the morning of his birthday he spent a good half an hour staring up into the green velvet canopy of his bed. He hadn't felt quite himself since coming back from the Malfoy's. Lucius had given him his proposal to join the Death Eaters, during which he explained that the Dark Lord and his servants were planning a sort of political overthrow to bring power back to the old wizarding families and that Severus, as the last surviving member of the Prince family, had a place in their regime and an opportunity to reclaim his mother's disinheritance and any future he could dream of. After that they had had a meal with Abraxas which Severus could not really remember eating; Abraxas had told him that the Prince grandparents had made it clear that Abraxas was to do with their money what he liked when they were gone, and that he had every intention of returning it to Severus but that there was likely to be a long and drawn out legal battle with the goblins, who would not like it if the money they were guarding against Eileen and Severus were to be transferred to his hands. Severus had never had any money to speak of and so had never dealt with the goblins, but he got the impression from Abraxas and Lucius's conversation that they considered them interfering creatures which the ministry did not take a hard enough line against.

Abraxas had also given Severus a very fine watch, "as is in keeping with wizarding tradition" he'd said. It was on Severus's bedside table right now. He could hear the faint tick of it as he lay in the semidarkness.

With a great deal more effort than it usually took Severus forced himself to stop thinking, got up, and went to shower.

Remus sighed indulgently, his head in one hand and a weary look on his face, as he watched Sirius consult the map and then draw on a napkin as they ate breakfast in the Great Hall.

"Okay, so. This is as far into the dungeons as we've been able to map, right?" He said, gesturing towards the parchment with a forkful of eggs. Remus moved Sirius's plate to catch the bits that fell before they could hit the map.

"Yes, that is very clearly where the lines end."

"Hush with your sarcasm, Moony. This is where the map ends, and we haven't been able to map out any more of it because we haven't had time to wander around down there in the dark, uninterrupted, without worrying about any teachers or getting lost. But you've had that idea that'll solve our problems, or at least the getting lost one."

"I can't believe you'd honestly never heard the story of the minotaur before." Remus said, unable to help himself from sniggering. "It's not even a muggle story! It originated with Greek wizards!"

"Yeah, well, my parents weren't exactly big on kids's stories were they?" Sirius said with a grumble. "But anyway. You've got some yarn, I've got the map, everyone'll be in Hogsmeade- I say today's a good day for it."

"And what are we going to do if we bump into any Slytherins? If we're staying behind some of them might have as well."

"I'd love to bump into some Slytherins." Sirius growled. "After what's been happening in the papers- and what Peter's girlfriend did to him- just let them try anything."

On this point, Remus was in solid agreement. The Slytherin girl Peter had been seeing had broken things off with him quite carelessly, hooking up with somebody else behind his back. Peter had been hiding up in the dormitory during free times for days, too unhappy to come down to eat. If Remus got his hands on that girl, she'd be sorry. Peter may have been a bit distant with them since he started dating her, and he may have made a bad choice in seeing a Slytherin in the first place, but he was one of the Marauders, and they took care of each other. They forgave each other. Even... well... even for incidents like what had happened with Snape that full moon.

"What's that look for, Moony?" Sirius asked, nudging his shoulder. 'What are you thinking about?"

"Snape." Remus admitted.

Sirius's face darkened instantly. Of the four of them (Remus, Sirius, Peter, and now Remus included Lily amongst them, since she'd started hanging out with them more last summer and warming up to James), Sirius had had the hardest time accepting James's burgeoning friendship with Snape. He was jealous, of course, but it was more than that. Lily seemed to think that Snape needed somebody to keep him grounded, even if she was no longer the appropriate person to fill that role, and Sirius clearly resented something about this view of the matter.

Remus's opinion, which he was unlikely to share with any of them, was that whatever Lily thought about Snape had very little to do with what was happening between him and James now. Months ago, he might have tried to be nice to Snape to impress Lily, but it had evolved past that. James had Lily's attention, her affection, now. And Snape... Snape had something James had always been attracted to, from the very beginning: a challenge. A new venue for him to exercise his magical creativity. First it had been quidditch, next the Animagus transformations, then it had been the map. Now it was Snape and the soulmate spell.

Remus couldn't help but wonder if they weren't a good match, after all. Two people, so dissimilar in their feelings, their character, and their goals, but identical in trajectory. A bird and an arrow.

"Yeah, he's a bastard." Sirius said, shaking Remus from his thoughts. "James'll come around eventually. It's only a matter of time before he shows his true colors, aligns with You-Know-Who."

Again, Remus had to agree. The thought brought him no satisfaction.

Severus was in no mood to see anybody, and was almost tempted to stay in the common room all day, before he remembered that this was a Hogsmeade weekend and he could probably get to the library and back undisturbed. With a sigh, he headed out of the common room.

Only to walk straight into- of all people- Black and Lupin.

"What do you think you are doing down here?" he asked the coldly.

Lupin opened his mouth to answer, but Black cut him off.

"We're *investigating*."

"Investigating what, may I ask?" Severus said, raising an eyebrow. He looked them up and down and saw the parchment, now familiar to him as the Marauder's Map, in Black's hands. He had a quill out and was clearly expanding it in some way.

"Oh, you know, *Snivellus*. Just making sure we're able to keep track of your movement. You and all your other Death Eater cronies can't hide down here forever, not if we know our way around."

Severus narrowed his eyes. He now saw for the first time that Black was trailing a ball of yarn behind him. He laughed sharply, both at the ridiculousness of the Gryffindors needing to Theseus their way around passages he knew like the back of his hand, and at the suggestion that his classmates would lose any significant advantage by this.

"If I were you, *Black*, I'd get back upstairs where you belong. Your precious map isn't going to help you in the end."

For the second time, Lupin opened his mouth to speak but Black cut him off. "Fuck you. I don't know what you think you're playing at, hanging around with James, but he can see right through you. Lily could, and James can now."

"Is that so?" Severus said, keeping his face impassive. Black's words had, again, rang true to him in a way he didn't like to think about. He quickly pushed his feelings about Potter and Lily to the back of his mind and began constructing a wall around them. "I'm sure it's no concern of yours."

Black fumed for a moment, and Severus smirked, feeling triumphant. "Now, I think your werewolf has been trying to say something, if you would be so polite as to shut up and let him talk."

Lupin grabbed Black's robes to keep him from jumping forward onto Severus. "Let him go, he's just riling you up on purpose." Lupin muttered.

"Yeah, well. I think I'm going to jinx him anyway." Black snarled.

"There's no need. I was merely on my way to the library. I'll let you get back to your, ah, investigation." Severus said, pointedly looking at the yarn trailing behind them and then heading in the opposite direction.

He listened to the pair bicker quietly, echoing off the walls long after he was out of their sight. He

felt both angry that they would dare come into the dungeons and threaten him, and angry that they would do it under the pretense of moral righteousness. "Keeping track of movements". It was exactly this kind of attitude on Black's part that necessitated that the Slytherins stick together. Their traditions and their blood kept them safe from people like Black, but only if they were united and used their skills and powers to their advantage. Lucius's group, while something Severus was slightly wary of for a whole host of reasons, at least seemed to understand this about Slytherins.

James came back from Hogsmeade in much better spirits than when he'd left. He and Lily had snogged a bit, and they'd bumped into Frank and Alice. They'd been in Hogsmeade to meet somebody about the political goings-on as of late but couldn't reveal anything more, which had intrigued Lily, and seemed glued at the hip, which had intrigued James. He wondered how long it would be before Frank asked Alice to marry him. He doubted it would be *very* long; Frank was a seventh year, and spring was coming. Spring was when James would have done it, if it had been him.

"So did the two of you have fun here, all by yourselves?" Lily asked Remus, waggling her eyebrows, when the topic of Frank and Alice's secret organization had finally been exhausted. Sirius opened his mouth but closed it again when Remus elbowed him in the stomach.

"Oh Merlin, you really *did*, didn't you?" Lily said with a giggle. Sirius cleared his throat.

"Yeah. We, uh, did. Not to completely change the topic, or anything, but what do you think about the apparition classes starting next weekend? You guys feel ready?"

When Snape didn't show up for their meetings the entirety of the next week, James sent him an owl. He got no response.

In desperation, he turned to Lily in the common room that evening. "Did he ever just... shut you out?"

Lily snorted. "You mean like he's been doing to me since the end of the summer?"

"Yes, obviously I mean before that. Were there any... sensitive topics, things he wouldn't talk about with you?"

Lily shifted around in her chair and hung her legs over the arm, sighing dramatically in a passable imitation of Sirius. "His family, his housemates, what he had for dinner, the list goes on. Look, James, I don't know what you want me to tell you. He's always been a very closed off person. It's some combination of being very private and being a secretive Slytherin, I think. He's just like that. If you want him to talk to you you'll have to confront him directly."

"Like you've been doing?" James said with a grin. Lily kicked a slipper in his direction. He caught it and threw it back, aiming it perfectly into her lap. She held it against her chest, sighed, and stared into the distance for a while before speaking.

"Your point has been taken. Maybe we should both talk to him."

"Alright. When should we do it?" James asked as he started to unpack his bag to study.

"Potions." Lily said without hesitation. "He's most comfortable there."

James nodded, opening his ancient runes textbook. It took him a long time to get himself to focus on the words in front of him, but he eventually managed to switch into homework mode.

James and Lily were somewhat distracted in their plans to corner Snape by yet another newspaper pile-up. Somebody from the ministry had been found dead, and Marlene was reading from an article to an eager crowd of Gryffindors outside the potions classroom that Dumbledore had suggested that it was part of an infiltration tactic; the person in question had reported to work the same day their body had been found over two hundred miles away, and a stock of Polyjuice Potion had been found in their home.

"Dumbledore?" Andrew MacMillan said, raising his eyebrows. "What's the headmaster got to do with all this?"

"Dumbledore's very popular with the ministry, helps them out a lot. I think he's got a spot on the wizengamot, as well." Lily said, moving to stand by Marlene and look at the article. "I can't believe this. There are people saying that Dumbledore's jumping to conclusions and that we should all wait until the investigation concludes before taking any action. I think it's a perfectly reasonable assumption to make that if somebody is in two places at once, and there's Polyjuice in their house, that they might be being impersonated by Death Eaters."

"That's what they'll be having Snape do in a couple years." Sirius muttered.

"What was that?" James asked him coolly.

"Snape. The little potions-loving git'll be their supply man when he leaves."

"What are you basing that assumption on?" James said. He could feel his face heating up and had to fight to keep his voice low so as not to cause a scene amidst the Gryffindors waiting for class to start.

"Just that he's a bastard, damn good at potions, and likely to join the Death Eaters." Sirius said, equally quietly.

"I'm getting really tired of you bringing up Snape all the time."

"Yeah, well, I'm getting tired of you hanging around Snape all the time." Sirius responded, his voice rising slightly. "What do you see in him? How can you trust him?"

"I don't trust him as far as I could throw him, but he's damn smart, and unlike you, Sirius, I understand the importance of being civil to the people!"

James said this last bit quite loudly, and Sirius, surprisingly, spread his arms wide in a gesture of surrender. James turned around and his stomach flipped uncomfortably to see Snape and Slughorn heading down the corridor towards them.

"Excuse me, dear boy." Slughorn said, inching past James to open the door to the potions classroom and head inside. Snape followed.

"Hey, Snape." James reached out a hand to touch the boy's shoulder, but Snape shrugged it off and strode past him.

Lily and James caught each other's eyes. "That went badly." Lily mouthed before entering the classroom.

Severus took his seat, clenching his hands to keep them from trembling. It had been obvious from Black and Potter's reactions when he had approached that they'd been talking about him, and the tail end of their conversation did not improve Severus's already strained mood. *Let them talk*, Severus thought viciously. It seemed like Potter was using him for something, but until he had figured out what that something was and how to turn the situation round in his favor, Severus had no explicit course of action. What did it matter if Potter didn't trust him? Severus certainly didn't trust Potter. However, he would have to resume their study sessions if he was going to make any headway, either in working out the *fortis animi* or in working out Potter's motivations.

He glanced over at Potter, setting up a cauldron with Lily, and something twisted in his gut. Whatever Potter's goals were concerning Severus, he would discover them.

James had a hard time concentrating on potions. Between the darting glares Snape kept throwing him and Lily's habit of tutting at him as they worked, he was very distracted. Hopefully he'd be able to catch Snape as they all left the class, but he wasn't very hopeful he'd be willing to talk. Depending on how much of Sirius's rant he had heard, he might very well have decided he didn't want anything more to do with James; James hadn't exactly advocated for him to Sirius.

After the third time James let the flames under their cauldron go out, Lily hissed in his ear, "We'll get him after the lesson, will you please focus?" She tied her hair back so she could lean over the cauldron. "This is still too liquid. We should have simmered enough of it away by now for it to reach the consistency of cake batter."

James looked down into the potion, which resembled a weak pea soup. "You're right, I'm sorry." He grimaced at her. The corner of her mouth quirked up.

"Switch places with me. You stir, I'll add stuff and keep an eye of the fire."

James shrugged and did as she asked, moving so that Lily was facing the blackboard and he was looking in the opposite direction, away from Snape. He found it much easier to pay attention to the potion when he couldn't see the other boy's scowl and the way he kept pushing his hair behind his ear.

Severus was expecting to have to hunt Potter down during dinner that evening, but was surprised and a little relieved when he hung back after potions to talk to him in the hallway. That is, until he saw that Lily was there as well.

"What do the two of you want?" he said, narrowing his eyes and looking from one to the other.

James looked at Lily, obviously hoping she'd go first.

"Well... James and I were talking about you the other night." She started, hesitatingly.

"Yes, I've heard that you talk about me often." Severus said coolly. Lily flushed and straightened up. Severus realized she'd gotten quite tall.

"Right, well. James and I were talking about you, and he made me realize that maybe we've had some kind of misunderstanding."

"Why are you avoiding us?" Potter cut in, looking, Severus thought with some confusion, very distressed.

"I am not sure what you mean."

Lily huffed. "Come off it, Sev. James says you've stopped your regular study sessions in the last week, and you haven't spoken to me since you sent that letter in August."

Severus raised his eyebrows at Lily. "Is it not considered impolite to continue trying to contact somebody who clearly does not wish to speak to you?"

"Is that really what you think?" Lily demanded. "Or is that just your excuse to avoid me at school? You'll talk to me when we're in Cokeworth and you've got no one else, but as soon as we're in the wizarding world and you've got Lucius Malfoy and his little cronies you ignore me? You're too good for mudblood Lily Evans when you've got your Death Eater friends?"

James grabbed her shoulder. "Lily." He murmured. "Don't be an ass."

Severus stared from one to the other, Lily who looked ready to cry and Potter who was glancing from her to Severus with an anxious, horrorstruck expression.

"I—" Severus opened his mouth to speak, but found he didn't know what to say. After several seconds he tried again. "How is my choosing to associate with my housemates over you any different than you choosing yours over me? I assumed you wanted to go our separate ways after you... made it clear to me that you preferred..." Severus gestured towards Potter, "the Gryffindors you associate with."

James shook his head very slightly, and Severus narrowed his eyes at him.

"You were my best friend!" Lily said angrily, a tear running down her cheek. "Before I knew about Hogwarts, before I even properly knew about magic, I had you. And you..." She wiped at her eyes furiously, and before Severus could step forward to comfort her, Potter had slid a hand around her shoulder. "You go around with people who hate people like me."

Now Severus did move forward. He took Lily's hand. "I have tried and tried to explain to you the importance of my relationships with my house. I can't cease my associations with them, but I didn't intend to hurt you. I doubt very much there is a chance of regaining our previous friendship when we're so clearly at odds on this subject, especially since neither of us are likely to change our mind."

Lily's angry tears increased to sobbing. James conjured a handkerchief and handed it to her. She took it with a small smile.

Severus turned his attention to James. "What is your role in all of this? Why are you here?" He snapped.

James sighed. "I wanted to know why you'd stopped coming to do research with me."

Severus looked back at Lily, very much wanting to avoid mentioning Lucius Malfoy in front of her, then raised an eyebrow at Potter. "I have had other things on my mind. I assure you, I had intended to speak to you tonight about resuming them."

"Oh." Potter said, deflating slightly. Severus tried not to smirk.

"What did you think was happening?"

"I thought maybe you'd, uh, been put off by how close Lily and I have gotten since the last time we spoke."

Lily blew her nose and glared at Potter.

"I have already told Potter but I suppose I will repeat it for you both: I really could not care less what the two of you choose to do with your romantic lives." This was a blatant lie, but the dimensions of Severus's discomfort with the idea of Potter and Lily together, as a couple, was not something Severus fully understood, and therefore was not something he would allow himself to voice to either of them. "I have always considered you a very dear friend, Lily, but nothing more." That, at least, was true.

Lily shook her head. "I don't understand boys." She muttered under her breath, and Severus, looking cautiously into her mind, found a roiling sea of embarrassment and a sharp sting of hatred. He quickly retreated and patted her hand in what he hoped was a sympathetic gesture. She glared at him.

"So." Said Potter after several long moments. "Should we head to dinner?"

Lily nodded. "I could do with something to drink, I think. Crying always makes me thirsty." She took a deep breath and wiped her face, handing the handkerchief back to Potter. "I need to stop in the loo first."

"Okay. I'll see you in the library later then, Snape?" Potter said, looking over at him from where he still had his arm around Lily.

"Around seven, I think." Severus said with a nod. Potter grinned, and the pair of them headed away. Snape wondered why he didn't feel more at the definitive closing of the door between him and Lily.

April came around again, and they had made very little headway. "I can't believe we haven't found anything in that Iamblichus book." Potter groaned, laying his face down on the table. Severus glanced up at him from the book he was reading.

"I could have told you as much before we started. I covered a great deal of Iamblichus's work last spring." Severus said. Potter raised his head to frown at him.

"Why didn't you say anything, then? We could have been looking at something else or... playing exploding snap, or something."

"You would rather be playing exploding snap?" Severus closed his book, watching Potter.

"Not that *particularly*, but we could be doing something fun, you know?"

"I suppose..."

"Chess!" Potter said quite loudly, earning their table a glare from the librarian. "You're probably good at chess, right? You seem like you have the kind of brain for it."

Severus regarded him for a moment, pulling another book off the stack at his elbow and opening it to the bookmark he'd left in it earlier in the week.

"I have never really had opportunity to find out."

Potter sat up straighter in his chair. "What? You've never played chess?"

"I didn't say that." Severus snapped. "I have not played it often. Probably no more than twice." He began scanning the page. Something from his previous research had been prickling at the back of his mind for weeks, since his mother had died. Something in a book on Iamblichus, or related material...

"Well, make it three. Let's go play chess, we're not making any progress at this point."

"I am trying to find something specific." Severus snapped again. He rubbed a hand over his eyes. It was, in fact, quite late in the evening and they had not made any progress. "Something I read in relation to Iamblichus. A scholar who wrote on him in the middle ages." His eyes flicked down the page, hoping something would jump out at him. "Something about transmutation."

Potter stood up and walked around the table to stare down at the book over Severus's shoulder. Severus tensed up slightly at his presence. He could feel Potter's warmth radiating against his back. Goosebumps prickled down Severus's arm under his robes.

"What does transmutation have to do with the nature of the soul and the origin of magic?"

Severus scooted closer to the table and away from the press of Potter's body against him. "That was very much my question. I couldn't find the original source which made such an argument, merely..." Severus trailed off. Merely a reference to a lost text by Circe. Circe, who's portrait was kept in a labyrinth within Hogwarts because she apparently was able to move people from the physical world into her portrait.

Severus stood up, knocking Potter aside in the process. Reflexively, he reached out an arm and caught him by the hand before he could fall. Potter straightened back up and looked excitedly from the book to Severus's face. "Did you find something?"

"I remembered something. Can you take me back to that corridor you found me in after the owl about my mother's death was delivered?"

James peered at Snape. His black eyes were bright, glittering in his pale face, and as James watched he moistened his lips. He seemed to be awash with excitement, and James took a self-conscious step back, suddenly very aware of their close proximity and the fact that he was still grasping Snape's hand.

"Uh, yeah, we can do that. I have the map. But—" James looked around the library, which was emptying out slowly before their eyes. "It's nearly curfew and I don't know how long you'll need to do whatever it is you're thinking, but I think it should wait until morning seeing as that portrait tried to attack you last time you saw it."

Snape was already packing books back into his bag and straightening the stack he'd pulled out of the shelves. He turned back to James, his head tilted, a smirk forming on his lips. "What's wrong, Potter? I thought you wanted to have a little fun. Isn't this the sort of thing you and your Marauders get up to? Sneaking round the castle in the dead of night?"

James felt an answering grin spreading across his face. "Is that a challenge, Snape?"

"Perhaps." Snape swung his bag over his shoulder. "If you are not interested, we can always go this upcoming weekend." He pushed his hair out of his eyes and made to turn away.

"No, we should go tonight. Let me just stop by Gryffindor tower and get something first."

"You own an Invisibility Cloak." Severus hissed as they crept down the corridor, hunched together under said cloak, Potter's illuminated wand held over the map.

"Yeah, I do, it's been in my family for years and you've said that a couple times now so maybe relax."

"You *own* an *Invisibility Cloak*." Severus repeated.

"Oh, shut up. You're just doing that to be dramatic now." Potter said, and Severus could almost hear him rolling his eyes. "We're nearly there, anyway."

As they rounded a corner and the edge of Circe's portraitframe came into view, Potter flung out an arm to stop Severus and turned to look at him under the cloak.

"Are you going to be okay with this? She did try to, I don't know, attack you the last time you were here."

Severus searched Potter's eyes, uncertain where this question was coming from. Potter continued to look at him, an earnest expression on his face. After a moment's hesitation Severus pushed into his mind and felt a confusing swirl of genuine concern, hesitation, and something which felt... warm, and which Severus didn't really know what to label. He blinked and looked away, at the portrait up ahead.

"Yes, I think so."

Potter pulled the cloak off the two of them and Severus led the way to stand in front of Circe's portrait.

"Ah, you again." She drawled, gazing at Severus over her steepled fingers. "I wondered if you might come back." She reached for her wand, lazily pulling it out of her mass of hair. Potter stepped forward so that he was partially in front of Severus, between him and the painting. Severus jerked his head to look at him and then back at Circe. She laughed, a slow deep sound.

"And the Animagus, too. How delightful you both are."

At these words Potter met Severus's eyes, and Severus raised his eyebrows. He looked from Potter to Circe, who was smiling toothily at both of them, and back to Potter.

"You are an Animagus?" Severus said, barely above a whisper. Potter looked uncomfortable. *Good, Severus thought viciously. Let him be.* "You are an Animagus and you did not see fit to share this information when we were explicitly discussing animagi?"

Potter squirmed. "Well, it was a secret. We aren't legally registered--"

"We?"

"The Marauders. Not Remus, obviously, because he's a werewolf- that's why we did it. To look after Remus when he's transformed. Werewolves need to hunt and he had to stay locked up so he couldn't hurt anybody but it was hurting *him*, but as animals we could keep him in line and keep him company at the same time." Potter said all this defiantly and very fast. Severus's eyebrows had raised so high it was actually painful.

"You and your friends became illegal animagi to look after the werewolf?"

"To look after *Remus*." Potter snapped. "He's our friend and he was hurting and I don't know if you've noticed, Snape, but I'm pretty damn smart, as is Sirius when he doesn't have his head up his ass. There was something we could do to help so of course we did."

Severus stared at him for a moment, carefully filing this piece of information away with other facts he had learned about James Potter's motivations before pressing on to more important matters.

"But all the time we've been researching essence versus magic and you never brought this up? This could provide us with so much information."

"Such as?"

Severus kept himself from rolling his eyes with extreme difficulty. "Do your animal forms appear on the map? Does Lupin as a werewolf? What are your thought processes like as animals? Does it vary with the type and intelligence of the animal? How did you determine what your Animagus forms were? How does magic affect you when you are transformed? Can you perform magic when you are transformed? There are dozens of questions that might help us get to the bottom of the soulmate spell just at your fingertips and you never said anything!"

"I can certainly see I misjudged when I assumed you were just a pretty face." Circe cut in suddenly, and Severus, reminded of her presence and the potential danger she posed, pulled out his wand. She laughed another of her peculiar laughs at him and made a show of twisting her wand back into her wild hair. "Don't worry, little scholar, I've quite changed my mind about eating you up."

Severus glanced from Circe back to Potter, unsure of how to proceed. There were so many things to discuss that he didn't know where to start. He said as much, and Potter shrugged.

"I'm starting to think we'll be here for a while so maybe let's start with conjuring some chairs or something."

"He's smarter than he looks as well, eh?" Circe said in a conspiratorial tone, winking at Severus. Severus stared back for a moment and shook his head, turning back to Potter.

"Right. Yes. It seems to me a good place to start would be in the reason we came here. We need to know everything we can about that Circe book. Did your occupant ever write a book during her life? Can you think of a book that was written about her?" Severus asked the portrait. She frowned at him.

"You seem to be laboring under the misunderstanding that I am not Circe herself."

"Of course you are not. Portraits are merely shadows of their subjects."

"I would not be so sure of that if I were you, my dear." She cleared her throat. "When a witch or wizard dies, their magic dies with them, but they are never truly gone."

"Are you saying all portraits are ghosts?" Potter asked, scrunching his face so that his glasses slid down his nose. Severus glanced sideways at him for a moment before refocusing on Circe.

"No, not at all. Ghosts exist in this world because a witch or wizard has refused to let go of their magic. Instead of allowing their magic to fade and returning to the Great Circle from whence we all come, ghosts have turned their magic into a tether, which holds them in this world unnaturally."

"What's the Great Circle?" Potter asked. Severus opened his mouth to speak just as Circe began to

do so. She smiled at him and swept her arm out before her, as if to say “go ahead.”

“The ancient Greek wizards believed the universe to be both eternal and changeable. They derived their ideas of magic from what they observed of the world, and since so many things in nature change on a cycle, determined that the changeable element of the universe looped back around again. Parmenides argued that we only see the world as changeable because our senses have no access to the true nature of reality. The Great Circle is the unchanging thing that is underneath all magic.”

Circe tilted her head back and laughed. “Very good, little scholar, very good. Then it seems not all have forgotten the way of the world, despite the attempts of those in power to hide it.”

Potter looked from Severus to the portrait, frowning. “Sorry, but I’m not sure I understand. Magic comes from the cyclical nature of the universe?”

Circe drew her wand and spun it in the air before her. A wheel of fire appeared. “This is the Great Circle. This is reality. Watch closely.”

Severus and Potter stared at the ribbon of flame, which continued to spin in place. After nearly a minute, Circe flicked her wrist and banished it. Severus blinked the afterimage of the flame out of his eyes, looking at Potter to see him doing the same.

“Do you still see the fire?” Circe asked. They nodded. “That is magic. That is what we do when we conjure or vanish or transfigure. We are seeing the effect of the connection to the essence.”

Potter looked, if possible, even more confused. Severus could hardly blame him; these were questions wizardkind had been grappling with since the dawn of time. He decided to have a go at it.

“Visualize a year as a circle. There are four segments to represent the seasons, but they loop back around again. A year represents both a short period of time and eternity, because within a year there are changes, but the loop of the year does not break and continues forever. There will never be a time when spring does not follow winter.”

Potter looked at Severus for a very long time, not speaking, and Severus, oddly, felt both very cold and very hot at once. He jumped when Circe’s voice brought him back to attention.

“An excellent description. Reality is such a circle, only much too large for any of us to perceive it. We do not know the essence of the world, the Great Circle, but our connection to it allows us to perceive and change things. We do not know where magic comes from, but we know it is part of the changing world, the seasons rather than the eternal year in your metaphor.” She nodded to Severus.

Severus mulled this over. Something about it was poking at him but he couldn’t determine what it was- and then Potter spoke it aloud.

“Isn’t ‘essence’ the word we’ve been using to talk about souls this whole time? Are souls... eternal?”

Severus inhaled sharply.

Circe smiled at Potter, showing her teeth. “What do you think?”

Potter turned to Severus, his face alight with excitement. “If souls are eternal, and magic is changeable, and *fortis animi* matches up people’s souls, then that would mean the spell actually has

nothing to do with magic. It just means two people are... well... compatible."

Severus's heart was beating very fast and his fingertips were going cold. He shook his head and, willing his voice not to shake, spoke. "Yes, and that doesn't make any sense at all. The spell was invented by an old pureblood and is passed down through pureblood families. It is used to matchmake with the goal of producing magically powerful children. Why would Selwyn, who invented the spell for this express purpose, not have it take magic into account?"

"I don't know. Why would Selwyn make it possible to be improperly matched, or matched up with a muggle?" Potter said impatiently.

"Why are you so desperate for this to be some grand romantic thing?" Severus asked, very quietly. "Are you still so intent on humiliating me? Have you not done enough?"

Potter stood up very abruptly. "I don't know what you think this has all been about, Snape, but you've got something very wrong somewhere if you think I'm trying to hurt you." He ran a hand through his hair. "This has always been about trying to *help* you."

Severus stood as well, clutching his arms to his chest and trying desperately not to tremble with the emotions he was suppressing. "If that were true you would not deliberately keep information from me, you would not conspire with Lily to corner me outside of classrooms, and you would not be pushing this line of discussion right now. I must assume you have some ulterior motive." Severus tried to breathe deeply, to calm himself-

and choked. He doubled over, bending in on himself, trying to breathe, trying to get a hold on himself, trying to-

Potter was grasping his shoulders and pulling him up. He was shouting something which Severus couldn't hear; his ears were filled with the rush of his own blood. Potter was grasping him, holding him, and it was too much. Something in Severus snapped and he felt his magic explode outward from him in a great blast. Then he was falling, his hands hitting the cold stone of the corridor. He shook on the ground, willing himself desperately to think, to push the waves of panic down and out of the way. He visualized the corner of his mind where he kept thoughts of Potter and Lily, together in Gryffindor while he must always be separate, all the desperation and anger and hopelessness and longing, and he shoved it back, back where he could close it off. He built a wall around it, the same thick stone wall that kept the cold of winter out of the castle, and he kept building until it was hidden from sight, until he could breathe again.

When he finally looked up, Potter was kneeling close to him, a hand on his shoulder. His facial expression was one of immense relief.

"Thank Merlin, I wasn't sure whether I should go for help or wait it out. Are you alright now?"

Severus stared at Potter. His whole body radiated tension but he was smiling widely. Severus shrugged the hand off his shoulder and made to stand. Potter jumped up and offered him his hands, clearly intending to pull him to his feet, but Severus struggled up on his own. "I am perfectly alright now."

"Well... good, I think. I'd hate to have been the cause of you fainting a second time." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"The first time being...?"

"When I hung you upside down by the lake."

Severus didn't look at him. "Ah." An apology seemed forthcoming and he wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

"Look, Snape."

"Be quiet, Potter."

"No, I won't. You need to know that I'm on your side. I've done some bloody awful things to you and I don't want to do any more, either on purpose or accidentally. But I don't understand you, and I need you to help me to if I'm going to keep from hurting you."

Severus narrowed his eyes as something clicked into place. Potter and Lily, discussing him, Lily loathing the other Slytherins, Potter's friends so angry about the Death Eaters... Potter thought he needed to lure Severus away from them. "You can start by ceasing to treat me as something fragile. You have been acting as though I am somebody you need to protect from myself, as though you do not see me as capable of making my own decisions. I don't know if this is some Gryffindor heroism, or something else, but I have had enough of it." He took a deep breath, rather satisfied by Potter's gobsmacked look. "You don't need to understand me. I'm not sure I want you to understand me. Whatever this spell means for us, I refuse to accept that it gives you a right to force yourself into my life without me having a say in the matter."

Potter looked thoughtful. "Do you want to keep working together?"

"It depends," Severus said, slowly and carefully, enunciating each syllable, "on what you are hoping to gain from doing so."

"I want to be your friend." Potter said without hesitation.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Why?"

"I don't know. Snape." Potter said tiredly. "Because you're brilliant, maybe. Because you're interested in the world and I'm interested in the way you think about it."

Severus pushed into his mind just enough to see that he was hiding something, and withdrew immediately. "I see." He said, sneering.

"Do you? Because I'd really like if we could get to a place where we trust each other."

Don't patronize me, Severus thought. What he said was "Perhaps we should resume this conversation another time."

Circe's voice spoke up from the wall, uncharacteristically brisk. "Good, I thought the pair of you would end up staying here all night." Severus, remembering her presence at last, turned to her and inclined his head.

"Thank you for your help." He stared at her, thinking about souls. If what they'd been discussing was true, portraits and ghosts were both just as real a representation of a person as he or Potter.

"If you ever need more you know where to find me." She smiled, showing her teeth. Severus nodded, and he and Potter began their trek out of the labyrinth and towards their dormitories for bed.

James was dead tired, but his brain didn't seem to want to shut off and let him rest. He kept

replaying the image of Snape falling to the floor in his mind's eye. It had shaken him greatly to watch Snape collapse in front of him, nearly as much as Snape's assertion that James saw him as fragile. Because, James realized, trying to squish his pillow into a more comfortable position, it was sort of true. James *did* see Snape as fragile.

He'd always been that way, ever since James had met him and Lily on the Hogwarts Express. He strengthened himself cold aloofness, with his own magical prowess, and with the status he gained by being friends with the Slytherins, but he had always been one breath away from utter calamity. James had been pushing against the delicate skin that held that calamity in for as long as they'd been acquainted, delighting in trying to create bruises and punctures, and it seemed he'd finally discovered a way, without even meaning to, to tear Snape open. Somehow, Snape's breaking point was the necessity of trust, and it made James want to scream in frustration. How was he supposed to get through callouses Snape had grown against him specifically? How did you undo a lifetime of antagonism? Especially when Snape didn't want him to?

James suspected the correct course of action was to wait, to let Snape grow to trust him in his own time, but what if they didn't have that time? They would be leaving school fourteen months from now and going their separate ways, and what if those roads set them further in opposition? James still didn't really believe Snape would join Voldemort, he was too smart to be taken in by all that, but there were other ways he could lose Snape than to the political divide growing amongst their classmates. His mind flashed back to the night he'd had to stop Snape from walking into the Shrieking Shack, and he shivered, wrapping his blankets more tightly around him.

When he did finally manage to get to sleep, James dreamed of running through the forest as Prongs, pursuing some creature that managed to stay just out of sight ahead of him.

Summer followed spring in the endless cycle of seasons. The days grew hot, the mornings misty, and everybody's attention turned to exams and their plans for summer break. Frank Longbottom did indeed propose to Alice one day in late May, and according to Mary and Dorcas, who felt that the whole thing was desperately romantic and could be found sighing over it all over the school, the wedding was scheduled for the next summer at the end of seventh year. James and Lily had gone on the last two Hogsmeade trips alone together and the only thing that was keeping James from asking her to be his girlfriend was Snape.

Snape and James continued to meet up to share their thoughts and research on the *fortis animi* spell, but Snape had moved into a detached, clinical way of communicating. Gone were the days where James could persuade Snape to join him on the quidditch pitch, or for a walk by the lake, or to the Come And Go Room for an afternoon of trying to come up with an iteration of the room they hadn't seen before. Whenever James expressed boredom with their studies Snape would simply pack his things away and return to his normal schedule. If Snape had ignored him outside of their little meetings before, now he positively fled at the sight of James coming down the hallway. James found it very confusing, because the overwhelming feeling he had towards Snape these days was candid affection.

It was usually little things. When Snape pushed his hair behind his ear, the habit he had of picking at his own thumbnail when he was thinking, his way of scribbling notes hunched over his parchment... James couldn't help but feel a little flare of warmth at these gestures. And there were other times, like when they'd make a breakthrough and Snape would look at him with eyes shining with excitement, where something lurched in James's stomach and some part of his brain screamed at him to reach across the table and pull Snape in for a kiss.

On one occasion they'd been putting their latest batch of books away and Snape had stretched up to a higher shelf, brushing his hair away from his face and exposing a bit of his neck, and James had actually stepped forward to push him against the stacks when Snape turned to glare at him and stalked off. James had returned to Gryffindor tower and brushed aside some question from Sirius about the Marauders' plans for the next full moon, locked himself in his dorm, and leaned against the door to take several deep breaths and try to get himself under control. Snape had made it fairly clear that he didn't want more to do with James than necessary, and James wasn't going to go back on his promise to himself not to push him, not this time around. Still, he found himself waking from dreams of black eyes and pale skin to sticky sheets more than once.

Snape was out of his reach, but Lily was not. She was perfect- funny and bright, with a sharp tongue she felt no qualms in using on James or any of his friends. She and Sirius, who'd been friendly since fifth year, had developed an absolute bond. She kept him in line in a way James had been trying to achieve for years, and James often got the impression that this, more than anything, endeared her at last to Remus.

And she was so beautiful, Merlin, was she beautiful. James took every opportunity to sneak out with her, up the astronomy tower in the evenings, into a useful cupboard between classes, to the secluded spot behind the greenhouses on a warm afternoon. They were dating in all but name, and that only because James felt so guilty about his one-sided attraction to Snape. It would just be wrong to go with someone, even if you were into them, if you were also into somebody else, he thought. But he had nobody he could voice these thoughts to, because everyone he knew who might be helpful was in the process of professing their loud disgust for Slytherin house as a whole these days.

The whisperings about Voldemort and his supporters had turned into mutterings, and in some cases to quickly stifled shouts. There had been two more disappearances from the ministry, and a family had been found murdered at the beginning of May. Many of Frank's friends had begun to be secretive in their own way, and there were rumors of an anti-Voldemort alliance forming. Sirius, whose younger brother Regulus had publicly called him a disgrace to the Black family several weeks prior, was raring to join whatever this alliance was and would not stop theorizing about what they might be doing, much to Remus's dismay. "I wish he'd just be subtle about it, that's all." Remus said in a disgruntled tone one evening as he sat with James doing their charms homework. "His big mouth is going to get him in trouble one of these days. No secret organization would let him in without putting a permanent silencing spell on him first."

James pursed his lips at this. Sirius may be loud and boisterous and, alright, a bit stupid at times, but he could keep his mouth shut when it mattered. He'd never revealed anything about Remus's transformation or their relationship, for example.

But that, James supposed, was just Remus's stress talking. The pair of them were having a hell of a time of it recently, and while James didn't know all the particulars, from what he'd been able to observe Remus was worried about his future after school while Sirius was decidedly not. James supposed it made sense; Remus would have a hard enough time finding a job as a werewolf without also being connected to a famous blood-traitor, and he was very much connected now. Sirius had made it clear amongst their group lately that he intended them all to remain friends after school, even hinting when news of Frank and Alice's upcoming wedding reached them that he'd be anticipating further wedding announcements from amidst their group of friends.

Which brought James's thoughts back, inevitably, to Lily. He really should just grit his teeth and ask if she wanted them to be an official couple, annoyingly persistent feelings about Snape be damned. He didn't have a future with Snape. He had a future with his friends, with Lily, with his fellow Gryffindors. There was no point in wishing for both.

So of course James went and did something completely stupid the last week of classes.

You must be the visceral river.

The last study session of the year, two days before summer break, Potter seemed uncharacteristically morose. Severus debated commenting on it, but eventually decided he didn't really care what was bothering him.

That is, until Potter grabbed his hand when they were packing up. "Can I write to you over the summer?"

Severus stared down at the table where Potter's fingers were wrapped around his own. His heart was pounding very fast and when he opened his mouth to speak, his throat felt very dry. "I-"

And then he looked Potter in the eye and what he saw in his mind drove whatever he had been about to say away like so much smoke in the wind. Because Potter was looking at him with that same intensity he'd caught there several times in the last term, and in his mind was undisguised desire. Desperate, determined desire, filling Severus with liquid heat as he stared into James Potter's eyes. The same pressure Potter's presence had caused him since the night he'd collapsed in Circe's corridor swept up in a wave inside him, cresting, cresting, a tsunami pushing against his chest-

He yanked his hand away and stood up. "No. We're done here." he said, hoping his voice came out in a controlled snap and not as a tremor. "Thank you for all your help but I believe I can finish devising a counter to the *fortis animi* spell on my own now." Never mind that the idea of doing so made him feel like he was drowning, like he was alone on a wide sea and was sinking, exhausted, through the waves. It was still better than the alternative. He hurried to shove his things into his bag and turned away. "Goodbye, Potter."

And he fled.

James asked Lily to be his girlfriend later that week, at the Leaving Feast. She kissed him heartily on the mouth, whispering in his ear "Took you long enough." James privately agreed. Snape putting an end to their research on the *fortis animi* spell, and therefore James's only reason to see him, had been like a slap in the face but he would have been lying if he said he hadn't been expecting it on some level. There was nothing to be gained by further association. It was time for him to let go of Severus Snape.

The first thing Severus did when the Hogwarts Express arrived at Platform 9 3/4 was pull his trunk into an alcove and shrink it to fit in his pockets. Then he turned on the spot, Disapparating.

He reappeared in front of the gates to Malfoy Manor. Lucius was there to collect him.

"Ah, Severus. How was the end of term?"

"It was fine." Severus said, brushing the question aside before he could begin to dwell on just how not fine it had been.

“And are you ready for tonight, and for what lies ahead?”

Severus swallowed. “I am ready.”

Chapter 7

Lucius led Severus into the dreaded drawing room, bowed to the man sitting in front of the fire, and left them.

"Severus Snape." The Dark Lord said. He gestured to the armchair across from him, which Severus took and crossed his hands in his lap. He had no idea what he had expected, but this quiet, smooth-faced man with thinning hair and red eyes wasn't it.

"You seem taken aback, my friend." Said he, pouring himself a drink of wine from a crystal decanter by his elbow. "In what way am I not what you were anticipating?"

Severus spoke before thinking. "I pictured you taller."

The Dark Lord laughed, a high, cold sound that sent a shiver down Severus's spine. "Yes, isn't that always the way? We who have grown up in poverty, neglect and discomfort are so rarely given the opportunity to reach our full potential." His eyes swept across the line of Severus's body, and Severus felt another shiver, this time of revulsion, that he forced himself to suppress. The man continued, his voice whisper-quiet. "But I can give you that opportunity, Severus. You need not fear for your future if you are amongst my Death Eaters. Together, we will bring about the return of the old families and cleanse the wizarding world of those who would keep us from what is ours."

Severus said nothing. He had been desperate for this meeting, ready to move forward with his life and claim his place in the wizarding world, buy himself some measure of security with the return of the Prince fortune. But he did not like this man. There was something about him that felt... wrong.

"Perhaps gold and status are not enough?" The Dark Lord asked, disbelief in his voice. Severus opened his mouth to speak, but the Dark Lord raised a hand. "Lucius tells me you have a voracious appetite for reading. He tells me you seek knowledge. A Ravenclaw?"

"No, sir. Slytherin." Severus responded.

"Ah." The man's lips widened into a smile which, uncomfortably, reminded Severus of Circe's portrait. "Yes. My own house. We are very much alike, Severus Snape. Do you know why I started

my crusade?"

"No, sir."

"I started it because I learned, when I was still at school, that those who are in power are content to keep building on the old ideas, even when those ideas are wrong. The knowledge which is passed down to us, oftentimes, is based less on what is possible, and more on what is comfortable. We are capable, as wizards, of so much more. But you already know that, don't you, Severus? I can see it in your mind."

Severus blinked and flexed his mental shields, not enough to push the Dark Lord out, just enough to confirm for himself that there was somebody there. The man took a sip of wine and withdrew from Severus's mind. Severus felt him go, like silk sliding over stone, and felt a measure of relief.

"I have spent my life pushing the boundaries of magic, sorting through untruths to find what lies beneath. Is it not natural that I should wish to do the same for those who rule our society? Should I not use what I have gained to ensure that the fools who would rather be comfortable than knowledgeable cannot stop others from following in my footsteps?"

Severus wasn't sure what to say to any of this. "I believe that people should be allowed to pursue knowledge, yes. Even knowledge which makes others uncomfortable."

"Then we are in agreement." He looked into the fire and took another sip of wine. "Tell me, Severus, if I were to give you a place with my Death Eaters, would you be willing to offer up your skills in potions and spell invention to my service?"

"Yes, of course." Severus said, surprised.

"Hmm. Would you help us to displace those who run the Ministry of Magic, even to completely overhaul the administration of the magical world?"

"In my admittedly limited experience they don't seem to be doing a stellar job." Severus said sardonically, thinking of his estate and reflecting on what the man had said about keeping knowledge from people. He had had to fight tooth and nail to find books to research the soulmate spell, had gone to great lengths to get his hands on information to help him craft new spells long before that, and had spent months making changes to potions because the textbooks hadn't been rewritten since the 1890s.

The man looked at him for a while and Severus felt his skin begin to crawl. "I like you, Severus." He said after a while. "You do not show fear easily. Many underestimate the value of such a trait."

Severus didn't know what to say to that, either, and so he merely inclined his head.

"In any case let us move on. Would you be willing to kill to help advance our goals? To help us make a new world where those in power revere and respect magical blood and magical knowledge, instead of forcing us to hide it away and bow to those who do not possess it?"

Tobias's face flashed to mind. Severus remembered cowering in his room as his father beat Eileen in the kitchen below. He remembered their last conversation and his threat to kill Tobias if he ever returned to Spinner's End. He remembered Dumbledore threatening him with expulsion if he ever revealed Remus Lupin's secret. He remembered running down a long, dark tunnel and clambering into a room full of snarling werewolf.

Severus felt something harden inside him. "Yes." He said shortly.

“Excellent.” The man’s voice came out like a hiss. He straightened up in his chair. “Lucius!” he called, and Lucius strode into the room and inclined his head.

“My lord?”

“Show Severus your mark.”

Lucius unbuttoned the sleeve of his left shirt and began rolling up the starched white fabric, moving to stand before Severus’s chair. Severus leaned towards the pale skin where Narcissa Black’s name should be.

And recoiled slightly. Where once there were words there was now a thick black snake, undulating from the mouth of a skull and sweeping back round again, its jaws opened wide and about to clamp down on the crown of the skull. Severus stared at it, transfixed.

“Do you know the Greek myth of the Great Circle?” the man hissed from his chair. “That our world is but a fleeting representation of another reality, one where our souls exist eternally? All of existence represented in a cycle, or, to use another image the Greeks enjoyed, the Ouroboros. The snake that eats its own tail, segmented yet self-contained. Changing, yet unchangeable. Summer to fall to winter to spring. A year, that repeats and has no end.”

Severus wanted to look up at the man but found he could not tear his eyes away from the spot where Narcissa Black’s name used to lay on Lucius’s arm. “Myth?”

“Yes, fool.” The man said in a ringing voice. He stood up, and Severus finally dragged his eyes off of Lucius’s arm to watch as the Dark Lord pulled out his wand and made the fire in the grate roar higher and higher. “The Ouroboros is a myth. There are no *souls*, there is no *other place*. The *fortis animi* spell works by detecting a point in the timeline of a wizard where there is a powerful magic caused by another, and affixing their name to one’s arm. Surely you know the power of names?”

Severus did. Naming a spell allowed you to command it, to ensure its effect was the same every time. It had been a part of wizarding folklore for generations that if you knew the name of another witch or wizard, you held some power over them. It was a central tenant of divination magic that someone’s name allowed you to access information about them using their magic. He nodded.

“In marking someone with a name the spell both creates and fulfills a prophecy. Using a complicated piece of arithmancy which is passed down with blood, the spell divines a person who will be present when a powerful piece of magic is cast. It then etches their name into your skin. When you see it, you assume, because you have been told your whole life and you are indoctrinated with it, that this person will be important, and so you start to spend more time with them. You create the situation that causes them to cast the powerful magic in your presence, nothing more. There are no *souls* involved. It is simple divinatory magic which has been used, not entirely ineptly, to determine who those from powerful bloodlines should marry ever since our kind began to be hunted to extinction!” He rounded on Severus and Lucius, and for a split second Severus was deathly afraid of him. But his features were perfectly neutral.

“After much study I found a way to change the appearance of the mark. I laugh in the face of eternity, Severus. I defy anybody, alive or dead, mudblood or Merlin himself, to tell me I must belong to the Circle.” He nodded at Lucius, who rolled down his sleeve and knelt at the side of Severus’s chair. “We are the Death Eaters, and we decide what eternity means for ourselves. Do you choose to be one of us?”

Severus was breathing very fast. Was this the answer? Was James Potter no more than a prophecy, a path he was supposed to follow? Was it really so simple as to declare he wouldn’t walk?

Severus fumbled the buttons of his sleeve open and exposed his forearm. Lucius chuckled as he looked down at the name. The Dark Lord stepped closer and cocked his head down to see for himself.

Severus felt him push into his mind and let him, flooding it with Potter's cruelties over the years; the event after the OWLs, sending him to his death at the hands of the werewolf, hexes and jinxes and aches and pains, blood, sweat, tears and always, always the reminder that he was other, that he was not good enough to associate with Lily and her Golden Gryffindors. Potter's clumsy attempts to make amends, his mockery, his refusal to leave well enough alone. The inexplicable desire writ large in his mind when their eyes met.

The man was laughing, laughing so hard that he had to put a hand on the arm of Severus's chair to steady himself. "Oh, Severus. Severus, you poor foolish boy."

Severus looked up at him, narrowing his eyes. "I don't understand."

"Don't you?" The man narrowed his eyes, so unnaturally red. "You are in love with him."

It was as if somebody had thrown Severus from a very great height several year ago and he was just now getting around to hitting ground. His whole body felt numb and distant. *In love?*

Severus opened his mouth, staring from the man to Lucius, who stared back at him expressionless.

The waves broke. James Potter, asking Severus if he'd be alright with him dating Lily, and Severus's inability to explain why he would not be. James Potter, bobbing outside a library window on a snowy day. James Potter, pressed against his side as they snuck down a corridor under an invisibility cloak. James Potter, handing him tea in the gamekeeper's hut. James Potter, telling Sirius Black he didn't trust Severus. James Potter, grabbing Severus's wrist to try and stop him from climbing up the mouth of the tunnel and into the path of a werewolf. James Potter, written on his arm as he stood before a foggy mirror in the Slytherin boys' bathrooms.

James Potter, smiling at Severus from across a table covered in books. James Potter smiling.

Oh, god.

The wall lay in shambles and Severus began scrambling at it, picking up bricks. When he had rebuilt it he cast a spell, then another, then another, making it impervious to water, to wind, to sun. He spelled it with a glamor so his own eyes would slide over it, so he would forget it was even there. He locked James Potter away where he couldn't find him, and in that moment, he made up his mind about himself and his future.

Severus inhaled and looked back up at the Dark Lord, who's smile held no warmth. "He could never love you. Love is a fairy story, and he cannot help you attain your desires."

The wall did not crack. It was true. Potter couldn't get him the Prince fortune, or a job at the ministry. Hell, he couldn't even get his friends to treat Severus like a person.

"You don't need him." Lucius murmured, taking Severus's hand gently.

"Yes." Severus said, holding his voice steady.

"What?" The man said.

"Yes, I want to be one of you." He repeated. The man nodded, and Lucius stroked a finger over his forearm. "I want you to change my mark." This had been what he'd wanted all along, after all. To

remove the blasted name from his skin.

"Very well." The man said. He brushed Lucius out of the way and drew his wand, laying the tip on the center of the name on Severus's arm.

Severus screamed in pain as the lines that made up James Potter's name began to rearrange themselves, sharpening and thickening, splitting and multiplying until there was no name at all, and a thick black snake about to eat a skull stared back at him.

Several Years Later...

"Alright, everybody look here." Moody called out, gruff but jovial. "Look here, I said!" decidedly less jovial. The bar full of people swiveled their heads as one towards the back of the room, and Dumbledore beamed at them all as he and Moody shuffled to stand with them in front of the camera.

"Smile, won't you? There are newlyweds present, after all." Dumbledore said warmly with a wave of his hand.

James grinned and grabbed Lily's elbow from off the bar. She flung an arm around his shoulder just as the flash of Moody's camera went off. He went to stand again behind the large tripod and grunted.

"Should be good enough, eh, Albus?"

"Splendid." Dumbledore agreed. "You may all return to socializing now. Goodness knows you need time to be cheerful amidst everything else."

Lily kissed James on the cheek and turned back to the bar, and James joined her, settling onto a stool beside Sirius.

"I can't believe old Mad-Eye wanted to take pictures of an Order meeting. You'd think he'd worry it'd fall into enemy hands." Sirius said.

"Don't call him that, Sirius." Lily said, but there was no real reproach in her voice. "Moody's a good man."

"Yeah, he is. I just think it's out of character for him to be getting any evidence we all meet like this." Sirius said.

James leaned closer to him. "His partner was killed yesterday. From the Auror department. I reckon he wants to memorialize us all here together cause he reckons not all of us are going to make it through." James said quietly.

"Fuck. I'm sorry." Sirius looked genuinely remorseful. "Do you think somebody should--"

"I think he'd rather nobody know about it, honestly." Said James. Sirius nodded, sneaking a glance back over James's shoulder at where Moody was still standing with Dumbledore. "And besides. If what Lily overheard was true..."

James looked at Lily, who glanced significantly at Sirius.

"About how Dumbledore thinks there's a spy?" Sirius said, thankfully taking Lily's hint and being very, very quiet.

"Yeah. If that's why he called the meeting, to perform the Fidelius Charm..."

"I've already told you that's not how the Fidelius Charm works." Lily snapped, elbowing James, who rolled his eyes fondly at her. "The Fidelius Charm is to ensure that nobody can find a location unless the secret keeper tells that person directly. It'll protect The Hog's Head from being discovered as our primary meeting place but it wouldn't stop somebody from telling who else is in the Order." She took a sip of her mead. "And if you ask me, Dumbledore probably made Aberforth secret keeper the moment he decided this was where we'd meet."

"Okay, Lily. Why isn't Moody worried about the picture, then?" Sirius said with a smirk, leaning on the bar to look at her. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Because nobody who's smart enough to hide under Dumbbedore's nose while secretly working for You-Know-Who would be stupid enough to try and steal something from Moody." She said, sounding satisfied.

Sirius barked a laugh. "That's fair." He waved to Aberforth for another drink. The barman levitated a butterbeer towards him with a flick of his wand.

"Who do you reckon it is?" Sirius continued conversationally. Lily shrugged. James frowned at the pair of them.

"I don't think this is a good place to be discussing this, you know."

"Ah, you're probably right." Sirius sighed. "But If I'm being honest... I'm worried about Remus."

James choked on his drink. Lily thumped him on the back. When he'd recovered, he snuck a glance at Remus, who was across the room talking to the Longbottoms.

"You think *Moony*—"

"No, I don't think Moony!" Sirius snapped, waving a hand. "I'm just... worried."

"What about?"

"He's been weird lately. Quiet."

"That sure would be weird for Moony." James said, deadpan.

"No, you git. We don't..." He cut off and made a sound half frustrated, half embarrassed.

Lily giggled. "I've never known you to be as reticent about anything as you are about you and Remus's love life."

James frowned at her as Sirius grumbled.

"I'm sorry, just because I've never been quite as obvious about snogging my boyfriend as you—"

James blushed slightly as he caught up with the conversation. "So you and Remus..."

"Haven't had sex in nearly a month, since you both want to know so bloody badly." Sirius snarled, taking another sip of his drink and trying to look dignified.

"Well, you've been together almost three years." Lily said diplomatically.

"You and James've been together two and I still see you with your hands all over each other."

"Yeah, but we just got married in August. Tends to put a bit of spark back into the relationship."

Sirius looked thoughtful. "You reckon Remus and I should get married?"

James finished his drink and clapped Sirius on the shoulder as he stood up. "I *reckon* you should *talk* to him. We're all pretty stressed out and worried lately. The two of you need to be there for each other." Sirius nodded, although he still looked like he would start grumbling any second. "I'll be right back, I need to piss."

James hummed to himself as he walked into The Hog's Head's dingy bathroom. He felt a little bad about it, but he couldn't help but think that he'd never been happier in his life. He and Lily had found a very nice kitchen set for the house the other day. He, Lily, Sirius, Peter, Marlene, and the Longbottoms had been able to rush through auror exams a year early because aurors were needed so badly and Dumbledore had vouched for them. The Order had taken down two Death Eaters this week and gained some intel about some cursed items they might be planning to disseminate; it was only a matter of time before they discovered where they were stashed and sent somebody to sort it out. He was happily married to a woman he loved and they and their closest friends were doing real good in the world. He felt... invincible. Invincible.

Severus took a drink of firewhiskey and stared out the window into the cold November rain, unusually pensive. In the two years since he'd joined the Death Eaters he'd purposefully kept himself busy enough that he didn't have a lot of time to sit around and think; it was one of the reasons he disliked his current assignment. Helping smuggle potions into the ministry was rewarding when he was brewing them, less so when he was sitting in bars to hand them off to Avery.

Severus wasn't permitted to go on any missions or see any action, but he supposed that made sense. He'd been undercover during his last year at Hogwarts, mainly advancing the Dark Lord's goals by getting Avery, Mulciber, and some of the younger Slytherins on board. The Prince estate had been quietly returned to him the summer after graduation, with a note from Lucius to consider it as a reward for the investment Severus had made in the Dark Lord's organization. He had gotten a potions mastery with the recommendation of Abraxas Malfoy shortly after leaving school, and was, on the surface, a halfway respectable young man. The Dark Lord had hinted that he would be sent somewhere as a spy, perhaps abroad. There were certainly advantages to being quiet, secretive, and, as the muggles would say, flying under the radar.

Nonetheless, Severus found waiting and doing nothing to be dull, much duller than he would have predicted. School had felt like one long period of waiting in many ways, and he'd have thought he'd become inured to it. But the desire to be acting, to be moving, to be one of the ones infiltrating the ministry or extracting information from reluctant witnesses or even just to be in on the planning, was ever-present.

The rain beat harder against the windowpane, and Severus sighed. He hoped Avery had a good reason for being late. His former classmate had never been the most punctual, but Severus would have thought, given that he was now reporting to both the ministry and to Macnair (who'd been with the Dark Lord since the beginning) he'd try a little harder not to make people wait for him.

Severus finished his drink and stood up to stretch his legs, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet as he did so. The two years since joining the Death Eaters had not made him any taller, to his

annoyance. The others called him "boy" quite often, even sometimes his own peers. Mulciber and Avery had both ended up a whole head above him, and Rookwood was growing an impressive beard. It would be Severus's luck to end up looking like an adolescent for the rest of his life; probably the result of too many years living off the meager meals his parents had been able to afford. Well, finally having the money to dress as he liked minimized it somewhat. Even being small and angular was made more impressive by many layers of billowing black robes.

Severus turned to peer out the window some more, said robes swirling around his feet. If Avery didn't show up soon he was going to comment on it to Macnair at the next meeting, prior friendship be damned. There was a very time-sensitive suspension waiting at Spinner's End and he rather wanted to get back to it before it blew up the muggle hovel he called a home.

Just as Severus was considering going outside to disapparate, Avery shuffled in the door, spelling the water off of his head and shoulders. He strode across the room and clapped Severus on the back.

"Sorry I'm late, there was a bit of an emergency. They've changed the scheduling of the next raid."

Severus shrugged off his hand and stared at him. "They've what?"

"The head of the auror office received a tip and the aurors are moving on the barn outside of Inverness tomorrow evening."

Severus swore under his breath. "That's months worth of supplies we will have lost." Months work of his own work and the work of a half-dozen others down the drain, and Merlin knew what kind of revision to the Dark Lord's timetable. "I can't believe this."

"Yeah, well, wait until you hear who they're sending." Avery said shortly.

"Who?"

"James Potter, Sirius Black, and those two mudblood girls that work with them."

Severus felt as though Avery had just poured the vanished rainwater down his back. "You can't be serious."

"I absolutely am. They're brand new at it, fresh out of training, that's why I had to go let Macnair know, so we could send somebody to ambush them."

Severus raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

Avery grinned, very unpleasantly. "Yeah. I did you the favor of dropping your name."

Severus did his best to keep his face impassive. "And?"

"And we're doing it, Snape. Tomorrow around 9, outside of Inverness."

Blood was pounding in Severus's ears as he handed over the potions Avery had come to pick up, as he apparated back to the awful little house his father had left him, as he ate a hurried dinner and went to work on the suspension. In twenty four hours he might be well and truly rid of Potter forever. It had made him an expert occlumens, to have thoughts of Potter always one misstep away, but at such a cost that Severus was thrilled at the prospect of ending him. There would be no more waking up in a cold sweat with Potter's name on his lips, no more "what might have been". He'd mastered his feelings, now it was time to master the man himself. He felt... cold. Cold and hard as ice.

Severus and Avery were waiting in the shadows of the eave of the barn when a loud crack announced the arrival of Potter and the others. Severus rolled his eyes in the dark, well aware that nobody could see him but astounded at the fact that the aurors were so desperate for more wands that they took on somebody who couldn't even apparate silently. Severus's money was on Black as the culprit.

Avery made to straighten up and go after them but Severus held him back. "Wait until they go into the barn, we'll follow them in and corner them." Severus murmured against his ear. Avery nodded. Severus focused in on their conversation.

"I'm surprised they just leave their stuff sitting out in the open like this." Said a voice which was clearly Black's. "Amazing for us, I mean, but you'd think they'd know to expect some kind of attack."

"They probably do which is why you should *stop. walking.*" Came a woman's voice, and Severus's stomach dropped. That was Lily. He might thrill at the prospect of killing Black and Potter but he had no desire to hurt Lily.

"Quit running your mouth and run your damn diagnostic spells, Sirius." Hissed another woman's voice, also familiar. Severus thought her name might be McKinnon.

Lights flared briefly around the edge of the barn, but Severus had anticipated this, and quickly countered their *hominem revelio* with a spell of his own. After a few more moments during which the four shot various spells around the clearing and into the barn and Severus and Avery remained undetected, there came the sound of the large wooden door being opened and the four walking inside.

"Ready?" Avery mouthed at Severus. He nodded. He had never been more ready.

They sprinted around the corner of the barn and into the doorway, Severus sending off a spell to prevent them from disappearing as he went. The four whirled to face them, raising their wands. Severus glanced at Lily for the briefest moment before his attention was dragged to Potter.

"Snape!" Black shouted, sending some manner of jinx his way, but he deflected it easily. He could not look away from Potter, who had grown so incredibly handsome since Severus had last seen him that it almost burned. The lingering roundness had gone from his jaw and his hair was, likely for the first time in his life, under control. Something was rising in Severus's throat which he quickly forced back down again.

No. This was not why he was here. Occlumens.

His shield went back up, and he was filled again with the sensation of calm, collected cold. With a flick of the wrist he deflected the curse Lily shot at him and rebounded it towards her, and the duel was on. Severus and Avery held their ground as the four recently appointed aurors danced around them, neither side managing to strike the other a serious blow.

"Stop!" Potter shouted after a minute, his voice cracking. "Severus, *stop!*"

Severus jerked to look at him and was hit across the face with a blistering hex from Black. He flung something back at him without looking, still focused on Potter, who was walking towards him with his hands raised.

"Severus." He said again, quieter this time, and Severus's hand trembled. He blinked, poking

behind the edges of his wall, trying to identify and name the emotion he was feeling.

Then a spell shot by Black hit Avery and he crumpled to the ground, writhing in pain. Severus turned to look at him for just a moment instead, and that was enough to pull his composure back together. He lifted the jinx on Avery, who lay on the ground breathing hard, and turned on Black. Severus curled his lips into a deliberate, mocking smile, then, summoning nearly ten years worth of hatred for the man in front of him, let loose a wordless *sectumsempra*.

What came next occurred so fast that Severus wasn't fully confident what had happened until later when he had reason to look back over the night's events in a pensieve. McKinnon dove in front of Black and the force of the spell knocked her back into his arms. He caught her easily as blood spurted from her body. Lily and Potter turned from Severus and hurried to McKinnon, all pretense of battle lost. They cast healing spell after healing spell, but *sectumsempra* had only one counter, another spell of Severus's own invention. Severus stood watching, detached. There was so much blood spilling onto Black's hands.

"How do I heal her, you bastard, how do I save her?" Black shouted, making to run towards Severus, but Lily held him back. "She's my responsibility! She's mine! Bloody hell, I was supposed to—" he took a great sobbing breath.

Severus looked on, blinking, as a storm of emotions played out in front of him and all he could focus on was how absolutely effective his occlumency shields were, and, distantly, the burning of his blistered face. Then he pulled Avery to his feet, grabbed his wrist, and disapparated.

The sound of knuckles rapping on the door made James jump. He shook himself as he strode across the tiny kitchen and pulled Sirius inside out of the evening gloom.

"Padfoot." He croaked.

"I got here as soon as I could. What's wrong?" Sirius said tersely.

James left his hand on Sirius's shoulder as he closed the door. "Merlin, Sirius, you look fucking awful." It was true. There were bags under his eyes and he hadn't shaved since James had last seen him. He also smelled faintly of that mint liquor Remus liked.

"Same to you." Sirius said, cracking a weak smile. "I haven't slept since..." He grimaced and looked away. "I haven't slept."

James nodded and gestured towards the kitchen table. Sirius sat without hesitation, slumping into the chair like a man defeated. James could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen his best friend like this, and all of them had been very, very bad occasions. Marlene's death had hit him hard.

"Drink?" James offered, pulling two glasses and an old scotch Lily's dad had given them when they bought the house from the cabinets.

"Please." Sirius responded, not looking at him. James sat down beside him and poured them both a generous helping of the amber alcohol. Sirius threw his back in one go and began to pour more.

"Hey." James laid a hand on Sirius's and slid the bottle away from him. "How are you doing?"

Sirius choked off a laugh. "I don't know why it hit me so hard!" He spat out, self-contempt heavy in his voice. "We knew this was possible, we knew signing up for the aurors and joining the Order

that we might lose friends.”

James patted Sirius’s hand in an empty parody of comfort. Remus’s voice drifted through his mind, out of a memory from his sixteenth birthday party. *Things don’t always work out the way you expect.* “I think...” James started, staring over Sirius’s shoulder at nothing in particular, “There’s a difference between knowing something intellectually and believing it.”

Sirius grunted. “She was supposed to be my soulmate.”

James shook his head. “We *all* should have known what we were getting into. It’s not your fault none of us...” he trailed off, because he wasn’t sure what exactly he was saying.

“I shouldn’t have let her come with us. Shouldn’t have let her join the aurors. She never really got over it when I dumped her for Moony.”

James rolled his eyes. “Like you could have stopped her.” He snapped. “Marlene could make her own decisions. You weren’t her protector or something just because her fucking name is on your arm.”

Sirius shrugged. “I don’t know, Prongs. She threw herself in front of a curse aimed for me. Because we dated once because she’s my soulmate. Was my soulmate. That makes me pretty responsible.”

“Then I’m equally responsible. After all, *my* soulmate threw the curse that killed her.” James said heatedly.

Sirius looked up, his eyes blazing and a snarl on his lips. “You aren’t responsible for anything that piece of garbage does, you hear me?”

“Then you aren’t responsible for Marlene.” James glared.

Sirius looked at him for a moment, concern growing on his face. “Oh my god, is that why you called me over here? Is this about Snivellus fucking Snape and your never-ending savior complex?”

James’s stomach twitched uncomfortably, because he *had* been thinking a lot about Snape the last few days, about what James could have done to stop the events that had transpired. But thankfully, he could answer Sirius truthfully. “No, that’s not why I called you over.”

James was suddenly uncomfortable. His news would probably be received by the vast majority of people as *good* news, and he hated to inflict his complaining on his friend who was already suffering. He took a drink and stalled for time.

“Well, let’s hear it. What happened?” Sirius prompted.

James took a deep breath. “Lily’s pregnant.”

There was a long stretch of silence during which the words James had just spoken seemed to hang in the air like a bad smell. Sirius looked as though somebody had just hit him round the head with a pair of shoes.

“...mate.” Sirius said after several long seconds. His voice was very hoarse.

“I know I should feel excited, and I do!” James said hastily. “I’m thrilled, really, we always were planning to have kids eventually, but it’s just-“

“Bad timing.” Sirius finished his sentence for him, and James felt a profound relief.

“Yeah.” He looked at Sirius gratefully, and this time it was Sirius who patted his hand.

James gestured around the room. “There’s a war going on! And we don’t know what’s going to happen six months down the line, or a year from now, or ten years in the future. What kind of world is going to be here for a baby?” James scrubbed at his face with hand. “How am I supposed to protect Lily and a child if I couldn’t even keep Snape from killing Marlene?”

Sirius shook his head. “I thought we’d agreed we aren’t responsible for our soulmates.”

James nodded, distracted. “Right, right. You’re right. But Merlin’s bleeding balls, Sirius. What are we going to *do*?”

Sirius poured James some more scotch. “Right now,” he said carefully, “We’re going to get falling-down drunk. Then I am going to sleep on your couch until we leave for the auror office tomorrow morning, because Moony will skin me and turn me into a rug if I show my face back home this evening.”

James jerked his head to look at Sirius, sloshing scotch down his front. “I thought you two were working things out?”

Sirius made a face James had come to know meant he was forcing himself not to cry. “We’re trying.” He said miserably. “But everything’s different now. I think he resents me for being out in the action while he’s cooped up at home.”

James didn’t know what to say.

“Fuck the ministry and fuck their damn werewolf prejudices.” Sirius said through another mouthful of scotch. “Remus isn’t bloody useless and he isn’t dangerous so long as I’m around to keep him in line. He’s tried reaching out to other werewolves, trying to see what kinds of things he can do to minimize the problems he’s having, but almost all the werewolves are with You-Know-Who. It’s almost impossible for him to hold down a job and he’s too damn proud to live off the money I make for us.”

James nodded sympathetically. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

Sirius snorted humorlessly. “I feel like everything’s falling apart, you know?” He shook his head and helped himself to another glass of scotch. “I never thought I’d admit this, Prongs,” he said tonelessly, “but I’m afraid.”

They sat in silence for a moment as James thought about everything that had happened in the last few days. The previous Order meeting, where Mad-Eye had taken a group photo and James had reflected that his life was nearly perfect, seemed eons ago.

“I am, too.” James admitted.

“I’m going to lose Remus.” Sirius said, his voice hollow, staring into his glass. “He’s going to leave me.”

“Don’t say that.”

“If I don’t I’m going to lose you, or Lily, or Peter. Marlene was the first but it’s too much to hope she’ll be the last. We’re not all going to make it, are we?” Sirius looked up from his drink, a lost expression on his face. James felt his heart break a little for his best friend.

"Will you be the godfather?" James blurted out, not really stopping to reflect on it. "If Lily and I die... will you look after the baby? You and Remus?"

A few tears trickled down Sirius's face and he let out a short, breathless laugh. "Yeah of course."

"Good. That's... good." James finished his scotch. "Get up, I'll side-along you back home."

"But—"

"No buts. We might not all live through this war but I'll be damned if the Marauders fall apart for any reason other than death."

Sirius snorted and stood. "Best friends forever, huh?"

"Yeah." Said James.

Severus was pacing the hallway of the run-down little pub on the edge of Hogsmeade, running over and over what he was going to say to Dumbledore when he was allowed into the small sitting room to see him. He did not expect to be welcomed warmly by the headmaster, and given his way would not have sought an audience at all, but the Dark Lord had chosen him for this task and Severus had been bound to obey.

The Death Eaters had learned of the existence of the Order of the Phoenix. The Dark Lord had learned that Dumbledore was keeping a secret group of people, aurors and otherwise, to resist the Death Eaters, and that they met somewhere near the school on a regular basis. The Dark Lord's followers were growing in strength and numbers all the time and it did not surprise Severus that he would want this resistance quashed as soon and as quietly as possible. Gringotts was now under their complete but secret control. Most ministry departments now had at least one high-ranking official under the Imperius Curse. An overthrow of the ministry was imminent. Hogwarts alone remained impenetrable. Severus had been right in his earlier suspicions that the Dark Lord had kept Severus's nose fairly clean so that he could be placed as a spy somewhere; it had been the Dark Lord's intention to have him apply for the position of potion's master at Hogwarts. The fact that Severus and Avery had been identified by Black and the others during that failed raid had been a source of extreme fury for the Dark Lord. Severus winced remembering the punishment he had been put through after returning to his master, and adjusted his robes so they sat more comfortably against his tender skin. It was only his skills as an occlumens, honed over his time suppressing thoughts of Potter and hiding his emotions from the Dark Lord, that had saved him from being executed, for those skills could be useful.

Severus's plan was to gain an audience with Dumbledore, determine what he knew of Severus's involvement with the Death Eaters, and, if possible, apply for the position of potions master. The lacerations still healing on his back and chest could be used to his advantage if necessary: proof of the cruelty of his master and evidence of his ill-standing with the group would appear good motivation for Severus to defect to Dumbledore's side.

A sudden loud thunk alerted Severus to his surroundings. Somebody had knocked something over in the room up the hall, across from the stairs. He walked forward, not really caring what had happened, but desiring to appear solicitous if somebody stepped out into the hallway rather than appearing like someone who had spent the last ten minutes pacing and trying to organize their thoughts.

Nobody came out of the room. Instead, a low, gravelly voice, devoid of all feeling yet carrying a

terrible urgency, emanated from under the door.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches.”

Severus started a little, his eyes widening and his brain working very fast as he leaned towards the door. He knew Dumbledore was hiring for two positions right now, potions and divination. He could remember smirking at the idea of applying to teach the latter when the Dark Lord had told him that he headmaster would be seeing candidates in early December. He knew that true Sight was so rare as to be almost legendary, it was why Eileen had never put much stock in divination and why Severus had been drawn much more towards arithmancy in school, which required merely mathematical prowess and attention to detail rather than some intangible skill very few possessed. He had never met somebody gifted with the Sight and had never expected to, but was it possible that on the other side of this door...? Prophecies took many forms, Severus thought, squeezing his arm where the Dark Mark lay, and leaning closer to listen.

“Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal—”

At that moment there was a bang and Severus was hit with some kind of jinx. He fell to the floor and landed painfully on his injured back. Stars popped into his vision as two men moved to tower over him. One of them was the barkeeper from downstairs, the other- Severus's stomach turned over- was Dumbledore, standing in the now open doorway and looking down at him with an expression of distaste.

“What is the meaning of this? Aberforth?” Dumbledore said, peering into Severus's eyes for a moment before looking up at the barman.

“Came upstairs to see him listening at the keyhole. *Flipendo*’d him right over.” Aberforth replied, striding forwards. Severus scrambled to his feet, wincing at the pain in his back. “I was doing no such thing!” Severus said hastily, trying to buy himself time to look into the room and see who had been speaking. “I merely took a wrong turn and was contemplating going back downstairs to ask where I might find my room.” He glanced into the room, but Dumbledore was moving to block it from his view, damn him.

“Headmaster?” Came a soft, misty sort of voice, very unlike the gravelly one Severus had just heard. A small woman wearing a number of gauzy shawls and oversized glasses which gave her the look of an insect stuck her face around Dumbledore’s arm and stared at Severus curiously. “What is going on?”

“We will resume our conversation momentarily, Sybill, now kindly step back inside.” Dumbledore said, a note of resignation in his voice, and Severus stared right back at the woman, a memory flashing to the surface of his mind. Walking down the corridor to the Great Hall with Lucius as a second year and watching Lucius laugh and point out to him a girl Lucius’s age with her hair covered by a scarf. She had glanced back at him with a frightened look and hurried on into the Great Hall. *Sybill Trelawney? That Ravenclaw Lucius used to make fun of?*

Aberforth clapped a hand firmly on Severus’s shoulder, making him wince away from the pain in his back, and led him downstairs before throwing him out into the night. Severus paid him no mind. He was already preparing what he was going to say to the Dark Lord when he was granted an audience with him later that evening.

Severus finished relaying all that had happened and all he had heard and bowed low in front of the

Dark Lord, hoping that whatever insight this partial prophecy brought him was enough to counterbalance the fact that Severus had failed to gain an audience with Dumbledore and get the potions position. Judging by the Dark Lord's high, cold laughter, this was the case. He looked up.

"Ah, Severus. You cannot imagine the implications of this prophecy you have relayed me." He chuckled and beckoned Severus forward with one bony white hand. Severus moved forward slowly and grasped the Dark Lord's hand, forcing any shred of fear from his mind as he knew it would only anger him.

"Do you know which couple has defied me three times and is also expecting a baby this July?" He said conversationally, pulling his hand from Severus's grasp and stroking his cheek. Severus held himself still determined not to shudder.

"No, my lord." It was true.

"Your marked and his mudblood beloved." The Dark Lord said, scratching a single sharp nail over Severus's skin as he removed his hand and backed away slightly, his smile growing wider. "You failed to kill them and the bloodtraitor Black at the beginning of November but I shall finish them off for you. Once she births the child I shall destroy them all and you shall be truly free of them."

Severus's heart seemed to have stopped beating in his chest. Had time frozen, or was it merely that the organ had ceased functioning? What was the feeling that was spreading through him, leaking through a hole in his wall like the water in that fairy tale about the little Dutch boy Eileen had told him when he was young?

The Dark Lord was speaking again, and so Severus quickly plugged up the hole and attuned his attention outward again.

"You cannot hide from Lord Voldemort, Severus. We are too much alike. I know that you still feel for him despite all you do to prevent it. I shall take it all away from you." He straightened up to his full height, towering over Severus.

Severus felt wave after wave of panic coursing through him. His blood seemed to have been replaced with mercury, shining, poisonous, viscous, stopping him in his tracks. He was surely about to be killed, and without relaying the knowledge of what the Dark Lord planned for Potter and Lily. His choices had brought him to this, his own sorry choices and his inability to let himself want. Potter was going to die without Severus ever saying... (and even in these last moments, behind a wall in his mind, Severus could not make himself think *that word*) and the idea froze Severus in an entirely different way than he had been freezing himself for the last several years.

The Dark Lord was still speaking. "You will go to Dumbledore, tell him that I plan to kill the Potters, and beg that he keep them safe. You will convince him that you no longer serve me, and you will gain the teaching position at Hogwarts. We will bring down Dumbledore's Order together, you and I, and I will remove this one last impediment to your success. James Potter will die, and with him his wife, child, and any hope for the Light to stand against us. You will be free to take your place at my right hand in the world I will create."

"Yes, my Lord." Severus gasped, flinging himself at the Dark Lord's feet, grateful that the relief he felt at these words was genuine while hiding the cause. He would go to Dumbledore, yes, and he would beg him to hide the Potters, but he would not, would never, allow that to be all he did. He would find a way to destroy the Dark Lord before he would allow him to kill Potter. He would destroy *himself* before harm could come to him, and, he thought as he stood up and prepared to disapparate, that would likely be necessary. There was only so far one could go before it became impossible to turn back without sacrifice, but if it came to it, Severus would make that sacrifice a

thousand times over.

"The prophecy did not refer to a man. It spoke of a boy born at the end of July-"

"You know what I mean! He thinks it means his son, he is going to hunt them down, kill them all-"

If he means so much to you," Dumbledore said coldly, unconcernedly, and Severus felt a wave of revulsion for how much he reminded him of the Dark Lord in that moment, "Surely Lord Voldemort will spare him? Could you not ask for mercy for the father, in exchange for the son?"

Severus stared up at Dumbledore, his beard whipping in the wind, and felt his hope drain out of him. This man had no more idea what the Dark Lord was like than any on the side of the Light. He did not have an answer to Severus's problem. He could not save them.

Severus struggled to his feet. He still stood a good foot shorter than Dumbledore, but he was now able to look him in the eye. "You know nothing. The Dark Lord has known of my affection for James Potter since the day I joined his ranks. He sees it as my one great weakness, a weakness he is determined to purge. I could no more ask for him to be spared than I could ask to be released from his service."

Dumbledore looked momentarily taken aback, but quickly rearranged his features. He opened his mouth to speak, but Severus cut him off. "Furthermore, I have known Lily nearly all our lives. I wouldn't sacrifice her life to save his, nor would I do the same to their child."

"You have never met the boy. What interest do you have in him?" Dumbledore said, peering into Severus's face. His tone had softened noticeably.

Severus opened and closed his mouth, unsure what he wanted to say. That Potter had the life he'd always wanted, the woman he'd always desired, and a child to boot was something Severus had very mixed feelings about, but even with all the time he'd spent suppressing them, Severus knew none of those feelings was hatred. Bitterness, yes; regret, yes; but not hatred. Potter deserved a life that made him happy.

Dumbledore placed a hand on Severus's shoulder. "I will hide them. In return you will come work for me, to maintain the fiction that you are still on Voldemort's side. I will expect you at the school at the end of spring term to begin getting ready for the next school year. Professor McGonagall will assist you; our dear Professor Slughorn plans to leave the country as soon as term ends."

Severus nodded, his mind already on his next plan of action. Dumbledore may have the best intentions of the Potters in mind, but Severus had learned years ago, on the night when Black had tried to feed Severus to the werewolf Lupin, that he couldn't be trusted to see and understand all factors of a situation. If somebody was going to save the Potters, it would have to be Severus himself.

Ten minutes later Severus was walking into the back room of Borgin and Burkes, having ascertained from the man at the desk that the item he was looking for was indeed in the shop. Looking around quickly, he spotted a large rectangular object in the corner, leaning against the wall and covered with an old sheet. He strode forward and tore the sheet off. The woman in the painting turned to look at him, her mouth widening into a familiar, toothy smile.

"Ah, little scholar." Circe said. "It's lovely to see you again."

Chapter 8

James rubbed at his face, more tired than he could ever remember being in his life but unwilling and unable to take a break from packing up the contents of his and Lily's home. Dumbledore had materialized outside the house early in the morning to inform them that Voldemort... that he...

James threw a curse at the window, relishing the sound of it shattering outward into the garden. He would not allow anything to happen to Lily and the baby. He couldn't. They were everything to him, them and Sirius and Remus and Peter and the Order. He couldn't imagine life without them, but he also couldn't imagine sitting in a cottage of Dumbledore's that had stood empty for decades and waiting for the war to end.

Lily came into the bedroom, likely drawn by the sound of the window breaking. She waved her wand and the pieces of glass soared back into place. James turned to look at her, trying to find something to say. She walked forward and put her arms around him.

"It's all going to be okay, okay?" She said, kissing him on the cheek. James sighed.

"I'm sorry, Lily. I never wanted any of this to happen." He gestured around at the piles of boxes, at the window, at himself. "I feel so useless."

Lily punched him lightly on the arm. "You've always been useless, Jimbo. I love you anyway." She smirked. James laughed and kissed her temple, glad of her ability to keep her humor in times like these.

"This is the last of it, then?" Lily asked, looking around at the boxes.

"Yes, I think so. Did you get the stuff in the bathroom?" Lily nodded. "Then we're just waiting on Sirius to get here so we can do the spell and head to Godric's Hollow."

A knock on the door in the next room announced that they'd arrived. James strode into the kitchen and ushered Sirius into the house.

James opened his mouth to speak but before he could Sirius held up a hand. "Let me go first, yeah?" James nodded. "Dumbledore told me what was going on and what you wanted me to do and while I'm glad I was your first thought for "somebody to trust with your life" I don't think I'm the right person to be your secret keeper."

James gaped at him for a few seconds. "Do you have somebody else in mind?"

"Peter." Sirius said instantly.

James blinked. He could sort of see why it would make sense; Peter was a bit of a coward, kept himself out of the action and out of trouble, and would never, in a million years, be the one an outsider would guess to be the one who knew James and Lily's location. Anybody who knew anything about the Potters would assume it was Sirius. But he would never have expected Sirius to make the suggestion. It wasn't like him to back out of a situation that involved personal risk and suggest somebody else take his place.

"Uh. Do you mind telling me your train of thought for this?" James said after a moment.

"Nah I don't mind." Sirius said, clearing his throat. "I don't want to put Remus in a bad position."

James stared at him. "You're not still wondering if Remus is the spy, are you?"

"Whether he is or not is irrelevant." Sirius said shortly. "Enough people know we're together for this whole thing to be dangerous for him." Sirius ran a hand through his hair and looked around the bare kitchen. "If he's the spy, they'd know enough about him that they could use him to get me to tell somebody. If he's not the spy, they could still use him to get me to tell, the other werewolves are all pretty chummy with the Death Eaters. You're my best friend, James, and I love you like a brother, but I can't..." his voice cracked. "I couldn't stand to let Remus get hurt." He looked disgusted with himself, and James would have been willing to bet that he saw this need to protect Remus over James and Lily as some terrible selfish weakness.

James strode forward and pulled Sirius into a hug. "I wouldn't ask you to. Of course we'll use Peter. I'll go and get him, you go home and be with Moony. We'll send Peter along to tell you both where to find us later, alright?" Sirius nodded against his shoulder. When they pulled apart Sirius grimaced and wiped at his eyes.

"Take care of each other, yeah?" Sirius said from the doorway.

"You and Remus as well." James said as Sirius stepped out and disappeared. James stared at the doorway for a long moment after he vanished, thinking. He absolutely did not want to believe Remus capable of betraying them, but he also had to admit that it wasn't outside of the realm of possibility. He'd never believed Snape capable of joining the Death Eaters, either, and look where that belief had got them. Sirius was right. It was better to use somebody like Peter, who most people tended to overlook, than to risk embroiling Sirius and Remus in the kind of conflict that would come about if someone used their higher profile to hurt either of them.

"I'm going out for a moment, Lily." He called into the next room, heading out to find the fourth Marauder.

Time flew by in great chunks for Severus. It was winter, and he was bowing and flattering and passing information to the Dark Lord, not enough to actually harm the Order or Dumbledore, just enough to let it appear he was still on the Dark Lord's side. Lucius and Narcissa announced their engagement, to the surprise of nobody who truly knew them; Severus had known she was pregnant for the last three months.

It was spring, and Severus was interrogating Circe's portrait every opportunity he got and keeping a heavily warded journal of his research. He borrowed Dumbledore's pensieve to review his own memories about McKinnon's death and everything he had ever known about her previously, because Black's words the night she died- the night Severus had killed her- had reminded him of something he'd known once but forgotten. Black had been marked for her. The Dark Lord had said that marks denoted a point in a wizarding timeline that was significant, and after much questioning Circe was able to confirm his suspicions. The mark found a place in a witch or wizard's life where another witch or wizard was connected to a powerful piece of magic that was personally significant. McKinnon had taken a spell meant to kill Black for him. She had been present, standing beside Black, because he'd loved her once for the name he carried. The name was there because of the *sectumsempra* Severus had cast that night. *All prophecies are self-fulfilling*, Severus thought bitterly. He only hoped that the presence of Potter's name on his own arm hadn't marked Potter for death, as well.

It was summer, and he and McGonagall were forming a tentative friendship as she attempted to

prepare him for his first year of teaching. Narcissa had her baby in June. The Potter baby was born on the 31st of July, a boy. Harry.

It was fall, and Severus was forced to put aside his research, his desperate attempts to find a way to save the three Potters, to focus on the students. He was horribly aware of just how ill-suited he was to teaching, and there were times when his own inadequacies threatened to swallow him whole. He had to find a solution. He had to.

It was winter, and he had made it through the first term without any deaths, either the students, the Potters, or his own. It was spring, and information Severus had passed Dumbledore prevented the Death Eaters from taking over the auror office. Rosier was killed. Severus felt nothing for this death except a sort of pride that his information had been useful.

It was summer again, and Severus had enough information to begin testing his theory.

He apparated to the Malfoy estate under the pretense of presenting a gift for Draco's first birthday. Narcissa was delighted to see him and told him as much, thanking him effusively for the small trinket. He made small talk with her for a while, waiting patiently for her to leave him alone in the library for a moment. When she eventually got up to check on her sleeping son, he warded the doors and began to run a complex series of spells, looking for the book he knew from a careful probing of the Dark Lord's mind was here.

After several minutes he located it, up on a high shelf between a biography of Salazar Slytherin and a book on architecture. Severus levitated it down, unwilling to touch it with his bare hands.

It was a small book, black, rather flimsy, with yellowing pages. A diary. Severus waved his wand and floated it onto a small table, then began to draw up a series of spells around it. His magic weaved through the air, etching a net of light around the book. When he was quite sure the spell was complete and the object properly bound in place, Severus closed his eyes. He took several deep, calming breaths as he prepared the spell, a variant of legilimency he'd invented for just this purpose. He raised his wand.

The air around the diary exploded. For a moment the world fractured, racing outward in a jagged web of lines like so much breaking glass, before it was caught by Severus's net of spell-light. Severus felt himself pulled into the spell, past the mind of Lord Voldemort, into the soul underneath. A great crisscross of magic sprawled out before him, connecting this diary in Lucius Malfoy's library with a cup in a Gringott's vault with a ring in a box buried in a hovel of a house with a locket in a basin deep within a cave with a tiara glittering in the Room Of Hidden Things at Hogwarts with the Dark Lord's human body somewhere in Kent with- Severus felt his stomach lurch uncomfortably- every Death Eater who had been branded with the Dark Mark. He saw a long thread running underneath everything, and each of these points branching off like forks in a road, each a decision, a choice, a becoming.

Severus remembered back to the night his mark had changed, to the controlled tenor of the Dark Lord's voice as he spoke of the Ouroboros and the idea of eternal souls existing in some other place. It had not been anger, Severus realized, in his voice. It had been fear.

Severus blinked hard, realizing there were tears streaming down his face and his eyes were screwed up in pain as he struggled to maintain the spell. But he couldn't end it yet. He needed an additional bit of information. With a great force of will, he focused in on where the largest thread divided into the thread of the diary. He slashed his wand through the air and slowly, painstakingly, he watched as the thread of the diary was cut, withered like a dead thing, and vanished into the darkness. The main thread flexed but did not break, but that was alright. It wasn't time yet.

Severus dropped the spell and fell to his knees, panting. Sweat poured down his face and trickled off his nose and chin onto his neck, he felt cold and clammy, and his stomach roiled, but he was happier than he had been in months. Years, maybe. The diary fell to floor and flopped towards him, and Severus picked it up weakly, flipping through its pages. Where before he could feel the same awful aura that had always emanated from the Dark Lord, now there was nothing. It was just a book.

He threw it in the fire and watched it burn as he dismantled the wards on the Malfoy's library door.

Days went by, and the Dark Lord gave no indication of realizing that Severus had destroyed one of his tethers to life and ripped a piece of his soul from existence. Severus, it seemed, was in the clear. Now all there was left to do was wait until the Dark Lord moved on the Potters, and follow him there to end him. In the mean time there were classes to teach, students to terrorize, and a set of masters to appease.

And there was Circe, whose portrait Severus had bought from Borgin and Burkes and now kept in his private quarters at the school. She seemed quite glad to be near enough to other paintings to be able to visit them but had told Severus she preferred his company, anyway. He was not displeased with this; she was the only person who knew every facet of what Severus was doing and what his plans were, and it was nice to have somebody to talk to even if she was continually trying to dissuade him from his ultimate goal.

"I don't see why you do not hunt down the horcruxes and destroy them. You'd be able to kill him like any other mortal man if they were all gone." Was her continual refrain, over his coffee in the morning, when he sat down for a quick chat before grading papers, in the evening as he prepared for bed.

"I have already explained this to you." Severus said crossly, for the dozenth time, as he took another bite of his croissant. "The Dark Lord is connected to this world in too many ways for me to be comfortable merely destroying those connections when I could instead destroy the underlying principle. It will be possible for me to tear his soul out of the fabric of the Great Circle and end him once and for all, so why should I not take that opportunity? The personal risk of the spell means very little to me, I assure you." What he didn't say was that he was afraid, desperately, horribly afraid, that if he began going after the horcruxes he might be discovered before he was able to save Potter, whereas this spell he had created would allow him to do it all at once.

"I think you just want to punish him for threatening your Animagus, and punish yourself for allowing it to happen." She said, examining her reflection in a conjured mirror. "You really can be ridiculous and obtuse, little scholar."

Severus humped and pushed his coffee away, standing up to start his day.

The day the Dark Lord found the location of the Potters started out innocuous enough. Severus woke, rose, chatted with Circe, made some final adjustments to his syllabus for the fall term, and went to join his colleagues in the room off the Great Hall for the first staff meeting of the year. Dumbledore was an hour into what was looking like it would be a two or three hour assembly when Severus felt the Dark Mark burn, and for a brief moment felt a measure of relief to be taken from the tedium of listening to Dumbledore talk. The man might be the head of the Light but he was immensely tiresome as an employer. Severus strode out of the castle grounds and apparated away, finding the Dark Lord in the Lestrange home.

"Ah, Severus. I am pleased to see you." The Dark Lord greeted him, and Severus inclined his head.

"What do you wish of me, my Lord?"

"Tsk tsk, how impolite you are. We are in a grand manor, there are niceties."

Severus felt the urge to roll his eyes and suppressed it. "I beg your pardon, my Lord."

"No matter. I know how you like to get right to the point." The Dark Lord twisted his lips in a smile which did not warm his face.

"I have discovered the location of the Potter's safehouse."

Severus's heart sped up. It would be soon, then. "Indeed, my Lord?"

"Indeed. I plan to go after them the last day of October."

Severus narrowed his eyes, thinking. "Why so much time, my Lord?" It was quite out of character for the Dark Lord to offer information to Severus, enough so that he suspected some kind of trap.

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed coldly. "Have I not told you before, fool, about the importance of time in prophecies? Deaths are more significant at certain moments, and the 31st of October is significant to wizardkind."

Severus scoffed internally. Halloween had been important to wizards once, generations ago, but in the last century wizards had slid right alongside muggles in viewing the date as a holiday on which to eat lots of sweets. No, this was something else, some kind of trick. The Dark Lord expected him to take this information to Dumbledore and have him move the Potters.

Severus had other plans.

It turned out to be a good thing the Dark Lord had given him so much notice, because it took Severus until mid-October to find out who had relayed the information and manipulate them into sharing it. He didn't know who he had been expecting, but Peter Pettigrew wasn't it. Severus felt a slight twinge of satisfaction at the knowledge that Potter's friends were not as blindingly loyal as Potter himself, tempered by the disgust that Pettigrew possessed not a single one of Potter's redeeming features. As far as Severus could tell, they had nothing in common which would have led them to befriend each other. Severus felt a small pang at his own childhood feeling of unworthiness for not being sorted into Gryffindor.

The Potters were staying in Dumbledore's childhood home, of all places, in Godric's Hollow. The place was under a Fidelius (Severus would have expected nothing less from Lily, as fond of charms as she was), bound with anti-apparition spells, and was Unplottable. He would have to apparate to the village and then walk in, as Voldemort would need do.

On the day of Halloween, Severus requested to be excused from supervising the Hogsmeade visit and went to Godric's Hollow, to wait, disillusioned, a few houses up the street from where the Potters lived. He stood amidst a copse of trees for hours, watching for the Dark Lord's arrival, as evening fell around him.

Harry gurgled happily from his spot on the couch, waving his arms in the air. James laughed and

flicked his wand, causing another bubble of orange yellow light to float towards the baby, who tried to reach up and grab it. It popped above his head, raining tiny sparks down around him. He squealed. James snickered.

“What are you two doing in there?” Lily’s voice called from the kitchen, and a moment later she entered the room, wiping her hands on her pants.

“Nothing.” James said with a yawn.

“You were supposed to be putting Harry to bed.” Lily scolded, fixing her eye on James, who threw his wand down on the couch with a small sigh. He nodded and stood up, stretching. “Right you are. I’ll go get him ready for his bath, yeah?”

Lily’s lips twitched as James picked up their son and kissed his head. She stopped him in the doorway that led upstairs, laying a hand on his shoulder. “I love you, you know. Both of you.”

James kissed her cheek. “I know, Lily.”

“You’re just feeling a little cooped up. Sirius and Remus are coming by next week, they’ll have an update on the whole situation.” Lily said sympathetically. She patted him on the bum. “Go take care of Harry. I’ll be up in a bit.” She winked.

James couldn’t help but think that if Lily thought their problems were limited to them both missing being in the action, that they were in deeper trouble than he’d thought. He opened his mouth to say something and heard the door in the kitchen blast off its hinges.

James whipped around and craned his neck to peer into the room. A tall figure in a black cloak was stepping over the wreckage of the door. Cold terror dropped into James’s stomach. He turned to his wife and shoved baby Harry into her arms.

“Lily, take Harry and go. It’s him.”

Lily, eyes wide with fear and anger, took Harry in her arms and cradled him to her, turning just in time to see Voldemort sweep into the living room. Before she could open her mouth to speak, James had placed a hand on her back and pushed her up the stairs. He moved to stand in front of her as she scrambled up them and bolted into the nursery, slamming the door behind her.

James stared Voldemort down, standing up straight as he could, broadening his shoulders and jutting out his chin. A memory came back to him, of transforming over a prone figure with oily black hair, and posturing this same way before werewolf Remus.

Voldemort laughed and raised his wand.

As though thinking about him had been enough to summon him to the scene, Severus Snape was suddenly in the room, bursting through the living room window which shattered around him. He positioned himself in front of James, his robes swirling out around him, and stared Voldemort down.

James watched Voldemort’s eyes narrow. “Severus Snape.” He murmured, his voice an awful sound. James tensed, preparing to push Snape out of the way of some spell.

“I am not here for you.” Snape spat as Voldemort looked on with an expression of disdain. He whirled around, facing James, and extended his left arm. James extended his own, and, instinctually, without knowing why or how but knowing it was the right thing to do, grasped his hand.

*You must think a little give
leads to affinities: the arrow
resembles the bird it will fly into.*

Time seemed to have slowed down as Severus looked into Potter's eyes. He clasped Potter's hand in his own and in his mind, let the water begin to flow through the hole in the wall. It came in great rushes, an ocean, a flood, and Severus let it. He allowed it to fill him up, love and desire and need long suppressed. He felt the remnants of his wall, crumbling stone and brick and mortar. He looked deep into Potter's mind.

And began to build a bridge.

James felt glued to the spot. He couldn't have broken eye contact with Snape if he'd wanted to, and Merlin, he didn't want to. There was something electric happening, some magical connection that James hadn't felt for years but so much stronger. Snape's eyes seemed to be filling James up with something light, swirling, iridescent. There were images and ideas flashing through his mind, some familiar and some strange. A wheel of fire, the changing seasons, Circe's portrait, a snake that emerges from a skull, a feeling so big and bright and infinite he thought his head might split. A thousand strands of light, all interconnected. Life and death and immortality, knots in a golden thread. Voldemort's fear. Horcruxes. A diary, a ring, a locket, a cup, a diadem. Deaths used to create tethers, to hold the soul in the world. Time and space and prophecies and love. Marlene's name on Sirius's arm. And behind it, behind it all, Severus's eyes, Severus's mind, wide open, and a phrase whispered to him, echoing in his head: *Do you trust me?*

Yes, James replied, the thought unreserved and wholehearted. Severus gave a tiny nod of the head, and James pulled him towards him by their still clasped hands, spinning him to face Voldemort.

Severus could feel James's magic coursing through him, through the connection he'd created using his modified legilimency. He turned his eyes towards the Dark Lord, smirking the way he used to smirk at Black as he watched the Dark Lord's face contort with rage.

"You shall be punished for this betrayal, most severely. But first I think I will make you watch your beloved die."

"I think not." Severus spat. He raised his wand and summoned James's from where it lay on the couch, nudging James through their mind bridge to raise a hand to catch it. *The imbecile*, Severus thought, and felt a ripple of indignation from James which he swatted away. There were more important things to worry about, like binding the Dark Lord and destroying him once and for all. He immediately sent James the spell he needed to know.

Severus felt and saw James cast the same spell net Severus had used on the diary, and he tore into the Dark Lord's soul. The same web of golden light appeared, reaching out to the horcruxes scattered across England. Severus ignored these smaller threads to focus on the largest one, the one that ran beneath them all and held the Dark Lord in the Great Circle. He drew on Potter's magic and his own, so much stronger together.

The thread of the Dark Lord's soul glittered in a tapestry of others, everyone he had ever killed to make a horcrux, all those he had given the Dark Mark. Severus tore it away, bit by agonizing bit, and the Dark Lord screamed in fury and pain as the horcruxes became useless and empty, as his soul was ripped from his body and from the fabric of existence.

The Dark Lord's corpse slumped to the floor, and Severus felt James move behind him. But Severus wasn't done. The thread of soul, horribly mangled, remained magically suspended somewhere that was neither the Great Circle nor the physical world. Severus could feel James recoil and protest in his mind when he realized what Severus was about to do, but Severus ignored him and began to weave the thread with his own. It would not do to leave the remnants of the Dark Lord's soul floating free where his supporters might be able to find them. They were so damaged that there was little chance of restoring him to any kind of physical existence, but Severus didn't want to take any chances. To magically absorb the soul of the Dark Lord into his own was repulsive, but at least he knew that when he died he would take all possible remnants of the Dark Lord with him. And was the integrity of his soul really worth protecting? No. Whatever happened to him, he would die knowing that the Dark Lord had been removed from all of existence. Severus smiled inside his mind at James, who he could feel panicking now. But it would be alright. James and Lily were safe now, as was baby Harry, and the world. They would be alright without him.

James felt what was happening as it occurred and had no idea how to stop it. Severus was merging the remnants of Voldemort's soul with his own, weaving them together in the Great Circle like some dark god of fate, and it was killing him. James held Severus tightly as the energy drained from his body, as he collapsed to the floor, tugging James down with him, as his breath grew labored.

"No, Severus." James muttered, his hands flying over Severus's chest and face, trying desperately to think of something to do. Severus didn't react physically but James felt a soothing feeling sent to him through their mental connection. It did nothing to comfort him.

"Merlin, stop." James all but shouted, grabbing Severus's slack face in his hands and shaking him. "You can't do this, you can't die for this." Severus didn't respond except to laugh softly in his head. James fought the urge to smack him.

"I don't know why you think what you've done is so unforgiveable but your soul is worth saving. Your life—" James stopped talking, struck with an idea. He could feel Severus realize what he'd thought, and could feel him fighting him, fighting to close their connection, but James was stronger now.

Raising his wand, James copied the same complex wand movements and thoughts he'd seen and felt from Severus just moments ago, and then he was looking at where his own soul and Severus's soul were connected in the Great Circle. He picked out where Severus had begun to tie the remnants of Voldemort's soul into his own, where the weak threads had been woven into the stronger ones, and he wrapped his own threads around it as well. He wove his soul into the soul of Severus Snape, took some of the burden of carrying the shrapnel Voldemort had left behind. He could feel Severus trying to break the connection, to throw him off, his fear of what this might do to James.

But his breathing was returning to normal. His body no longer slumped across James's legs. He was moving again, moaning softly, and James grinned down at him.

"That was really bloody stupid." James said when he opened his eyes.

"Was it?" Severus rasped, and James could feel fear flickering in his mind. "I knew what I was doing."

"No you didn't! Don't even argue, I can read your mind, Severus." James responded, letting out a short burst of relieved laughter.

"Yes, well. I knew I was able to protect you, and so I did. It seemed the least I could do after everything I have—"

James leaned down and kissed him, shifting Severus in his arms to reach his mouth better. Severus shivered and grabbed at his hair, pulling him closer, and James felt joy and desire war with panic and fear in Severus's mind. James let him go gently and looked into his eyes.

Severus stared at James, still holding him against his chest, his lips rather red. The mental bridge was still working, and Severus was both desperate to use it and terrified of what he would find. James mentally nudged him, and Severus took a deep breath before plunging into his mind again.

He blinked. "You love me." He said. James laughed.

"I love you. Have for years."

Severus didn't know what to say, so he pushed the water he'd kept walled up for so long towards James's mind instead.

James sighed brokenly and ran a hand through Severus's hair, cupping his cheek. "I'm sorry. For everything."

And he kissed him again.

"What the bloody hell is going on down here?" Lily's voice brought James back to himself. He jerked his head away from Severus, who flinched, and stared at his wife who was coming down the stairs, still clutching Harry to her chest.

She looked from James to Severus and back again, her expression confused and fearful.

"Lily." Severus said, staring up at her.

"Sev." she snapped. "Tell me what happened."

Haltingly, together, using their bridge to fill in the gaps of each other's stories, they told Lily all they knew. How timeless souls exist in some other place and manifest themselves as consciousness in the physical world. How Selwyn's spell used arithmancy to find a spot in the timeline of wizards where a powerful piece of magic was used, and name the user to create a self-fulfilling prophecy that would lead those two wizards together. How Voldemort had discovered that the existence of immortal souls does not mean the existence of immortal consciousness, and, fearing the obliteration of himself, began using the magic from the deaths of others to tie his own soul to the physical world in places that were not his body, so that if his body were to die, his consciousness could be brought back. How portraits are mere echoes of consciousness, derived from the soul and pulled back to the physical world but containing none of the same personhood that the living subject had. How ghosts work rather the opposite way, maintaining consciousness but obliterating physicality. How Severus had created a spell that would work by borrowing James's magic to help tear Voldemort's soul away from the Great Circle and embedding it in himself so that nobody could ever find it, and so that when he died he would take Voldemort's soul beyond the reach of anybody. How James had seen that this would kill Severus, and taken on some of the burden himself, twining their souls more deeply together than any two had ever been or would ever be. How they had lived. How they would all live.

Lily pulled her husband to his feet and, after a moment, pulled Severus up as well.

"You did all this for James?" Lily asked him, her face incredulous.

Severus glanced from him, to the baby, to Lily. "I... for all of you. I never wanted to lose you." This last was directed at Lily specifically, and she burst into tears as she threw an arm around him and began to sob into his shoulder.

Severus patted her on the back, shooting a slightly frightened look at James. He snorted and moved in to embrace them both, taking care not to squash the baby between them.

"I think we're going to be okay." James murmured, placing a kiss against Severus's temple.

Epilogue.

Spring, 1983.

Everyone knows the world is ending.

*Everyone always thought so, yet
here's the world...*

*Some stories have been
trinkets in my mind since childhood, yet what clings is not
how my mother couldn't go near the sink
for months without tears...
but the grief in the skull like radium
in lead, and the visible dumb love like water
in crystal, at one with what holds it. The triumph
of worlds beyond words. Memory entices because ending is
its antonym. We're here to learn
the earth by heart and everything is crying
mind me, mind me!*

Severus rubbed his eyes and glanced up from his desk, strewn with pages of complex equations and more than a few empty cups of tea, at Circe's portrait, hanging on the wall of his office. She beamed back at him, a hand stroking over the piglet in her lap.

"Aren't you ever going to go home, little scholar?" she pressed him. "I'm sure the Animagus is missing you."

Severus snorted. "I'm sure he is, but if I don't have this theorem sorted out soon—"

"Absolutely nothing will happen and you know it. The Department Of Mysteries has been moving in its own universe at its own pace since its formation and the minister himself couldn't tell you what to do, anyway."

This was decidedly true. There were more than a few perks to being the wizard who had killed the Dark Lord. He had gotten the job he'd always dreamed of, been cleared of all charges that many other Death Eaters had not escaped, and was making enough money to buy all the muggle records

and potions ingredients he could possibly desire.

There were still points of darkness. Lucius Malfoy had been sentenced to ten years in Azkaban and Narcissa was now raising Draco without a father. Severus did his best to look out for them, but there were limits to what their pureblood pride would allow. Nothing could ever bring Marlene McKinnon back, and Sirius Black, while having finally come to grudgingly accept Severus's place in James's life, would never truly forgive him, not that he deserved forgiveness. Peter Pettigrew's betrayal had hurt James very deeply, and things had never been quite the same between James and Remus and Sirius ever since, although James had told Severus he was hopeful things were starting to heal there. Severus had become much more conscious of his physical health since the night he had killed Voldemort, and could now add "prone to overworking himself" to his physical flaws alongside "far too pale", "disproportionate nose", and "quite short". There were nights when he would drink a glass of firewhisky, and then another, and then a third, and then throw it all up when he remembered the tone of Tobias's voice or Eileen cowering in the corner. He was very careful to never raise his voice or his hands around Harry, and while he always succeeded at the second he often failed at the first. He lost his temper at the reporters who would sometimes come around to ask him about his work, but these had been decreasing in the last year (probably due in part to his well-cultivated public reputation as a miserable old bat).

But, despite all arguments against it, despite reason, he was loved. He had James and Harry and Lily, who he'd tried to die for and would do again, and Remus, who was really quite a nice fellow separate from Black, and Narcissa, who despite her pride was a good friend and a lovely woman, and Draco, who had adopted him as a sort of surrogate father. He had Circe, who had never stopped surprising him and who had continued to help him make great strides in his research and who Severus had been able to bring back to the wizarding world. Her good name had been restored and her Hogwarts portrait now hung in a busy corridor where she, according to Lily, was frequently to be found teasing and scaring young students with her "I'll turn you into a piglet" routine. He had his colleagues, who had never stopped calling him boy, but who now did it with a sort of affectionate cheer. He'd heard the rumors as well as anybody, that behind his back he was "the boy who lived", some kind of great martyr hero, which he brushed off as silly and absurd. Anybody would have done the same in his position.

He sighed and Circe tutted. "For Merlin's sake, go home. The work will still be here tomorrow and at this point you're only risking slipping into melancholy."

Severus stood up and began piling his papers into a stack to shove in the drawer. "How did you get to know me so well?" he said, raising an eyebrow at her.

"You're easy to read, little scholar." she crooned, winking. He laughed. It felt good.

Pulling on his cloak, Severus took a look around his office, a warm feeling in his chest. There was so much to learn here, so much about souls and magic and life and love, but these things did not belong in a cold office underground. They belonged in a warm kitchen with good food and James beside him. Severus shut off the light and closed the door on his the Department of Mysteries office.

"Merlin, you look pretty." James said to Lily when he opened the door to let her in. She smiled warmly and kissed his cheek before handing over a sleeping child. James took Harry in his arms and shifted him so his cheek leaned on James's shoulder. "Evening plans?"

Lily blushed. "I'm seeing someone for dinner, actually."

James felt a grin spread over his face. "Anyone I know?"

"I don't think so. Sev might, though. He works at the ministry. In the Department of Magical Catastrophes, I think."

James nodded, still grinning. "How'd you meet?"

"Through Frank and Alice, actually. He was at Natalie's baby shower. You should have seen Neville, he's gotten so big."

James nodded. "I wish I could have gone, but you know what the auror office is like."

Lily snorted. "Figures they'd give you the very next weekend off. Glad I jumped ship and went back to Hogwarts."

James made to shrug, then looked down at Harry and thought better of it. "I'm glad you're happier now." He said earnestly. He wasn't just talking about her career change. She seemed to pick up on his double meaning, because she patted his cheek and started bustling around making tea.

"I'll never understand how Sev managed to do it for two years. I mean, I adore teaching, but it doesn't seem like it would suit him."

"It didn't." James said with a laugh. "He's much happier now as well." Harry yawned and shifted in James's arms. "I'll be right back, I should get this one to bed. You're welcome to the pie, by the way. I think Severus made it for you, anyway."

Lily grinned at him and opened the fridge. James chuckled and headed upstairs to tuck Harry into bed. He'd be a right mess in the morning, but James knew that if he woke up the little boy to get him to bathe and put on pajamas, he'd be up for hours, and James was really looking forward to having an evening alone with his husband. Working at the ministry was fulfilling for both of them, but it did tend to make scheduling time for each other difficult.

When James re-entered the kitchen five minutes later Lily was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of tea and a slice of strawberry pie, humming to herself.

"So. What's up?" James said, plopping down with his own tea and pie. Lily frowned very slightly. "Come on, there's something on your mind or you wouldn't still be here, not with a date to go on."

Lily sighed and rolled her eyes. "Mind your own business, Jimothy, maybe I'm just waiting around to say hi to Sev when he gets home."

"Uh huh, and maybe Remus and Sirius keep all that Devil's Snare around for decoration. I know you guys. I know what you're all like." James said with an air of joking superiority.

"Do you now?" Lily said, playfully flicking a bit of strawberry at him. It splatted against his cheek and he wiped it off with a napkin.

"Yeah, so fess up. What do you and Severus need to talk about?"

Lily took a drink of her tea. "He's making me a fertility supplement."

James almost choked on his pie. "Wow, bit eager, are you? Didn't you say this was your first date with this guy?"

Lily glared at him. "Since you must know, it's got nothing to do with him. I want another baby and

I also happen to have been talked into going on what amounts to a blind date with a friend of Alice's."

James stared at her. "Lily... Don't uh, don't take this the wrong way, but you know that if you wanted to have more children, you could have brought it up with me and Severus."

Lily watched him for a long time. James listened to the sound of the house settling and the light spring rain that had begun to fall outside and said nothing.

"I... well, honestly, I didn't want to get you involved because I was worried you'd assume I was pining or something."

"What?" James said, flabbergasted.

"I was worried that if I brought it up you'd assume I was bitter we weren't still together because I wanted more kids. And I'm not. I love you and Severus and I'm glad you're together and that you make each other happy, because we certainly weren't doing that for the last year." She ran a hand through her hair and stared into her tea. "I kept telling myself it was just because we were trapped in Godric's Hollow and cut off from our regular lives, but I knew that wasn't it. We're not... the two of us, we don't work together, and I know that, and I wouldn't you to think—"

"Lily." James said firmly. "If you want to have another baby I fully support you. I never wanted for Harry to be an only child and whatever you decide to do, me and Severus and Harry will be here for you. I thought I made it pretty clear when we split up that you're still welcome in our lives."

Lily huffed. "I know that, you idiot. I just..." she gestured around the kitchen. "I felt weird bringing it up to you because Sev offered to be the sperm donor."

James shrugged. "The three of us are a family, as far as I'm concerned. It's not up to me to tell you or Severus what you can or can't do."

The bell on the door that James had hung up when Harry had started learning to walk tinkled as Severus swept into the room. "I believe I heard my name." he said, leaning down to kiss James on the cheek. "Hello, Lily. That dress suits you."

"Thanks, Sev. James and I were just talking about the potion you've been making."

"Ah, of course." Severus said, moving to hang his cloak up and pour his own cup of tea. "Are you two finished awkwardly reaffirming your comfort and acceptance for the situation?" he said dispassionately.

James blushed and Lily scowled. "Gryffindors." Severus smirked from one to the other. "You're so easy to rile."

After Lily had finally left for her date and Severus had taken a shower, the pair sat cuddled on their couch, eating a thick stew Severus had made earlier in the week and watching the muggle television. Severus had been amused with how quickly James had taken to the piece of technology, but not nearly as amused as he'd been to watch James sneak glances at him all evening, waiting for the right time to start talking about Lily again.

Eventually the tension was too much for Severus and he shut off the tv with a click of the remote and laid a hand on James's shoulder. "If any part of it bothered me I would not have agreed to it." He began. James turned to stare at him.

"Are you sure? Because if it were me I'd probably be jealous."

"Fortunately for the world at large, you're not me." Severus said with a drawl, loving the way James blushed. "You are mine, and nothing anybody can do will ever change that, so why should I be jealous? If she wants another child and you want Harry to have a sibling I am more than happy to oblige. In fact, the only reason I have not suggested that we have a child ourselves is that the potion for male conception takes so long to brew, and is so unstable, that I greatly fear the idea of leaving it in the house while Harry is still waddling around poking his nose into everything. I don't wish to take the time away from the ministry to brew it and then have a baby myself, and Lily wants both a baby and to continue to be a part of our family. Everybody wins."

James nodded, looking at peace for the first time that evening. "And what about me?" he murmured, leaning over to press a light kiss to Severus's neck, making Severus shiver and lean into the touch. "What do I get?"

Severus's breath hitched as James moved closer on the couch, bringing a hand up to tangle in Severus's hair. "I- oh." He began, and was immediately cut off by the sensation of James's lips, which were now thoroughly exploring his neck. He moaned softly as James slid his hand out of his hair and began unbuttoning the top of his robes so he could kiss across his collarbone.

"What do I get, Sev?" he whispered as he continued to unbutton Severus's robes, moving into the v of Severus's legs. Severus's head fell back as James's hand began to stroke over the front of his pants.

"Me." Severus gasped, pushing up against James's hand.

James chuckled. "Eager, are you?"

"Shut up, Potter, or I'll do that legilimency trick you dislike." Severus said, the effect of his tone somewhat ruined by the breathy quality of his voice. James laughed.

"Should we go up to bed?" he said, kissing his way across Severus's chest.

"Yes." Severus said, grabbing James by the wrist and apparating them to their bedroom.

James laughed again. "Merlin, Sev, it would have taken us five seconds longer to walk up here."

Severus shrugged out of his now completely unbuttoned robes, cast a silencing spell at the wall they shared with Harry's room, and set his wand down to begin derobing James.

A few moments later they were both naked, and James was leaning over Severus on the bed, pushing him backwards onto the mattress as he continued to kiss and suck on his neck.

"The- ah!- the woman at the ministry's front desk likes to joke that I'm a vampire but the evidence would seem to suggest it's you, if the amount you suck on my neck is anything to go by." Severus said, his eyes closing in pleasure as James held him close and covered him in small red marks.

"You're neck isn't all I want to suck." James growled, and Severus moaned and pulled his hips closer, grinding their cocks together.

"God, I've missed this." James sighed. "I feel like I haven't seen you in ages."

Severus rolled his eyes, then pinched them shut as a wave of pleasure washed through him as James shifted his hips just so. "It's been twelve days."

“An eternity.” James agreed. He began sliding down Severus’s torso, one hand on his cock, and Severus grabbed his wrist to prevent him from moving.

“Fuck me.” Severus whispered, and after a heartbeat James nodded. Climbing back on top of Severus, he grabbed his wand off the bedside table and cast a silent lubrication spell before leaning back down to continue kissing Severus. Severus fisted a hand in James’s hair, another leaving scratch marks on his back, as James slowly slid into him. Severus let out a long, high pitched whine, and was very glad he’d bothered with that silencing spell.

“Look at me.” James whispered, his eyes wide and a bead of sweat on his temple. Severus peered into his eyes.

I love you, echoed through his mind.

Severus smirked. *Old romantic.* “I love you, too.”

*So long as we keep chanting the words
those worlds will live, but just
so long, so long, so long. Each instant waves
through our nature and is nothing.
But in the love, the grief, under and above
the mother tongue, a permanence
hums: the steady mysterious
the coherent starlight.*

"The arrow resembles the bird it will fly into." -Alice Fulton, "Echo Location"

For hundreds of years witches and wizards have been matched with their most magically compatible counterpart by a spell which marks a name on their skin.

All this may unravel when Severus Snape wakes up on his sixteenth birthday to find the name "James Potter" on his arm.